THE MERRY WIDOW

FOUNDED ON FRANZ LEHAR'S VIENNESE OPERA

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THE PRINCE AND THE WIDOW.

When the swaying dance is saying, "Love me, dear!"

Frontispiece.

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THE MERRY WIDOW

A Novel

Founded on Franz Lehar's Viennese Opera, "Die Lustige Witwe," as produced by HENRY W. SAVAGE

Illustrations from Scenes in the American Production

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The Merry Widow

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By permission of Henry W. Savage, from his production of "The Merry Widow."

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The Merry Widow

PROLOGUE

The Dance

"When the swaying dance is saying
'Love me, dear!'"

The feet of all the girls went tripping, spinning invisible webs on the tanbark floor, and still more subtle webs in the hearts of their lovers. And such lovers! Mountain-men with proud poise of head and huge swing of limb—every one a king. Their fury of fun made the floor groan as they caught their partners in their brawny arms and whirled them to the fret of the fiddles in motions swift and mazes strange. "Dancing keeps off disease and drives off devils," say these grim giants, who in the fastness of their hill-country know the world as little as they know the moon.

Superstition sits well behind those wide eyes. One legend tells of a country maiden who danced so gracefully that she won the heart of a prince who chanced to be passing that way, and he bore her off to the capital of his land and she became a great and good queen. The augury of her good fortune had appeared that day in the form of a spotless white bird that dropped down from the sky, alighted for a second on her shoulder, and then mysteriously disappeared.

And the little knot of houses that clustered under one of the capless peaks—they were rock without covering of grass or trees—contained a merry maiden who tripped the toe with a grace uneclipsed by the famous one of song and story. All Pech went merry-making that night, some to drink and some to dance, for it was the birthday celebration of Sonia Danvic, the belle of the obscure little hamlet. And she was fit for a prince! So said every out-danced maiden who watched the gazelle-eyed creature as she wove her white arms round and round in tune with her flying feet and threw out little

eye-kisses to the admiring men. The glory of hair, the glory of love and the glory of motion—a trinity of glories—danced in the witching form that serpentined its course around the room and lured the lovers from their wine as sweetly as Laura wooed young Petrarch from his Latin. Sonia, too, had her prince—only he was not yet come. But that very morning, as she drove the cows afield, a bird had fluttered in her hair, and if not as white or as strange as the one of tradition, it set the gossips a-whisper with the question whether a knightly or kingly lover would not appear at the evening dance given in her honor.

And Sonia was ready for him. After her companions through sheer exhaustion had dropped down on the wooden settees that were ranged around the sides of the quaint little inn, one filmy cloud of white and gold kept on revolving—a small whirlwind of lace that threw out anon the unhidden grace of arm and limb.

As she went on and the unknown lover did not come she grew reckless; off came the red

mob-cap, out flew the gold-headed pins and down flowed and tumbled her tresses black as night, rippling to her waist, even to her knees, forming a striking contrast to the snow of arms and neck that glistened through the raven cataract.

And still he did not come, and greater grew her abandon. The little wooden sandals dropped from her spinning feet and the unchecked tide of white flowed down into tiny toes that touched the sawdust floor as lightly as thistledown or as the leaf unbound from the tree. And where was the royal lover? The prince and the dance had missed each other by a day.

CHAPTER I

Smiles of Fortune

Where was Sonia's prince? He was at that moment in the Marsovian bank at Rovitz, negotiating for a marriage with no less a lady than the daughter of the wealthy banker. To the honor of the prince, be it said that it was a blind contract. The terms were in a sealed envelope which he was forbidden to open until he had returned to Castelo, the seat of government. "You are to receive ten thousand ducats, but you are not to know your part of the obligation until you reach home."

The prince looked at the banker in astonishment. He had arrived that day from Castelo with a commission to inspect the bank, and had been lavishly entertained by his host, but here was a business proposition for which he was wholly unprepared. His gaze fell on a door just beyond the speaker, for he had heard the

rustle of skirts and he felt sure that behind its panels a woman was listening. It was very much like a blackmailing plot except that the banker offered to give the ducats, rather than demanded to receive them.

The prince grew serious. He looked blackly, half affrightedly, at the man who made the strange offer. Under his curly black mustache sat the single word:

"Why?"

"You are a prince."

"But not the heir to the throne."

"You have one chance in six."

"You have studied the genealogy of the house of Petrovic, Signor Vapin."

The banker turned to a letter-file and drew forth a missive which caused the prince to start. The envelope was official and bore the royal seal.

"I am betraying a confidence, Prince, but our contract, if carried out, will bring us into close relations, and there should be no secrets between us. This is an order from Secretary Dusan to watch your conduct while in Rovitz

and report to his highness what I think of your business ability. Such an order can only mean that you are designated for the throne if you show the proper qualities. When you become the reigning prince you will need money. Indeed, if I mistake not, you need it now, for I understand the revenues are small and the country is in debt."

The prince was quite taken aback. "I thought I was sent to watch you, but, by my soul, you are set to watch me."

A faint smile broke over the banker's cold, white face. "And since we are both under surveillance, we should work together. You give my house the title and I give your house the money."

The prince reflected. He had been sent by his government to investigate the conditions of trade in the South and to ascertain whether the people could endure further taxation in order to replenish the depleted treasury. He now understood that his mission had a double purpose: It was to be a test of his ability. If he transacted the business with a high order of

merit, he might be chosen to succeed Prince Nikola.

Hitherto he had taken his journey in a holiday spirit, drinking at the inns and flirting with the women. In fact it was his lightness of heart that had caused Stefan Dusan, the Government Secretary, to doubt his fitness to handle the affairs of State. Otherwise, the prince possessed the necessary qualifications. He had a stalwart frame, a handsome face, and a noble bearing. He was genial, hearty and popular, the favorite at the court, and would ultimately be selected for the highest office in his country if only he manifested the statesmanlike qualities essential for a ruler even in so small a state as Marsovia.

The prince determined to reform his ways. He would renounce women and wine and pay strict attention to business. But, as the banker said, he needed money. Ten thousand ducats would not sustain him very long with his extravagant ways and in the style becoming the expectant ruler, but doubtless there were millions of ducats behind the thousands offered

for the marriage bond, if indeed such the mysterious paper proved to be. His cursory survey of the bank had disclosed a vast holding of mortgages, and the banker wore a prosperous look. An alliance with the wealthy house of Vapin would no doubt commend itself to the government, and help his prospects as successor to the reigning prince. His fingers itched to feel the banker's money. "How much of the ten thousand is available now?" he inquired.

The banker looked at him shrewdly.

"When you open the envelope you may not find the contract to your liking. However, I will advance one hundred ducats on condition that you ride at once to Castelo and wire me without delay whether you accept the terms."

"But why not settle it now and here?" demanded the mystified prince.

The banker shook his head.

"I have my reasons for requiring you to determine the matter in Castelo rather than in Rovitz."

He touched a bell and ordered a messenger

to bring the money. When the prince saw the shining gold pieces, his indecision vanished and he hurriedly crammed the yellow coin in his pocket. He took the envelope from the table and looked at it curiously. Did its seal hold some fearful family secret? For he could not believe in the banker's hint—that he was merely buying a title. Rudolf Vapin came of independent Servian stock that hated kings. His talk had been of liberty and equality, and while of comfortable fortune he made no show of his wealth, sett[illegible] no carriage and only o[illegible].

The prince was anxious to reach home discover the secret that lay under the mysterious envelope, and so he hastened his departure with an exhortation from his host to ride as fast as he could and send word as soon as possible whether he accepted the unknown terms.

When the door had closed on their royal visitor, the members of the family entered the room. First came Volgotha, the banker's daughter, and she was so quick to appear that

the prince caught a vanishing view of her face, and was confirmed in the suspicion that she had overheard the transaction just closed. It was not noble, perhaps, but upon a subject so vital as her own marriage any woman may be excused for being an eavesdropper. She was tall, straight and slender, with her father's whiteness of skin and blackness of hair. The banker looked at the members of his family, and they at him, and all breathed a sigh of relief.

"... know?"

"Not a wo...."

"He didn't search?"

"... a page."

"Nor look in the vault?"

"Not a peep."

The laconic questions and answers passed between the son and the father. Young Vapin burst into a coarse laugh.

"You are an old one, father. But do you think the deal will go through, and will our sis become the Princess of Marsovia?"

The banker shook his head.

"No, but the danger for the present is averted. His curiosity to know what is in that envelope will make him ride like a racer to Castelo. If I had not got rid of him, God knows where we should spend this night."

"In the town jail, probably," laughed the son.

"Herdi!" protested his mother. She was a little woman with great rabbit eyes that looked their terror, and with a death-like paleness on her face. It seemed as if the family scandal, whatever it was, would kill her. His father rebuked the young man.

"This is not becoming of you, Herdi, seeing it is you who have brought the trouble upon us." Herdi paused in the act of lighting a cigar. He had a dark, sinister face, and his drooping mustache sought in vain to hide the contemptuous curl of his lip. An evil look shot out of his black eyes as he answered angrily:

"I tell you I did not lose the money on the games; I was robbed by the cursed gypsies."

"Even so, my son, but if you had not taken the money it would now be in the bank."

Herdi's reply was only the defiant snap of a match as he lit his cigar and stalked sulkily out of the room.

Meanwhile the prince was clattering fast in the direction of Castelo. He reckoned that if he rode hard all day he might make the town by late evening. But strenuous work was not his forte. He liked better the merry inns and the pretty barmaids who handed out the foaming beer, and, although the mystery of the envelope was in his pocket, it did not serve long to whet his appetite for a hot pace. He had hardly dropped a couple of miles from the heels of his fleet roan when he drew rein on his fiery steed. He was well out of Rovitz and pricking along a lonely country road. The well-cultivated farms had given place to rugged hills, beyond which towered the Dismal Mountains, their highest peaks not having yet doffed the white cap of winter. The bulky waists of these gloomy giants burned yellow with chestnut forests, shot through with needle-tufts of sable hemlock, while their feet were brilliantly clothed with green olives.

The prince loved the country and was quite at home in his work, or, at least, with as much of it as consisted in riding from town to town and regaling himself on the fat of this hospitable land. The crisp morning air made his blood tingle, and in his royal veins leaped the fires of riotous youth. The prospect of court life with secretaries to instruct, and states to manage, irked him. He loved the freedom of this wild land, the feel of the warm vibrant horseflesh under him, and the greeting of the buxom, red-cheeked lassies who welcomed his handsome face in every town. Rulership meant a prison in a palace, and marriage the devotion to one woman.

"Why should I be tied to that white thing?" he reflected, referring to the banker's daughter. "I half guess the secret of the envelope, but if it means marriage, I will not accept the terms. I love the woods and the girls; I love to ride and to flirt. I will not marry and I will not rule. Let one of my dapper cousins be clipped down to the proportions of a throne-heir, if it suits

him, but as for me give me my freedom to strike out as I please."

His eye caught the sweep of a graceful bird wheeling over the mountain crag.

"That life for me!" he exclaimed. "A free eagle and no owl mousing around a court."

The scenery grew wilder and the fields less open. The forest came down to meet the road and embraced it. From out of the velvety olive boughs he heard voices. He thought of robbers, and one hand went instinctively to the pocket that held the banker's ducats, while the other grasped the pistol that protruded from his embroidered belt. Then he took a firm grip on the bridle of his splendid horse, and, riding slowly, awaited the adventure, whatever it might be.

A turn in the road revealed the source of the voices; it was a gypsy camp and not a robber's den, although the prince well knew that the first often passed easily into the second. There was the usual array of a Romany camp—dirty tents and weather-worn

vans, the variegated wash a-flag, and the picturesque children up-heels. Odd birds and animals, too, formed a part of the miscellaneous outfit. A baboon that might have passed for one of the gypsy tribe poked his head out of a hole in a tent, a parrot squawked in an unknown tongue, and a creature, rolled into a fluffy ball like a hedgehog or a huge hairy crab proved to be a strange species of dog, too old or too lazy to bark.

The belle of the camp, who was also its lookout, had no doubt seen the horseman when on a hill half a mile away, for she was out on the road ready for business. Bare-headed, her raven hair flowing to her waist, and her red jacket set off by the evergreens that were almost black in the dark forests, she formed a picture that pleased the prince. Her half-Indian face had a pleading expression that appealed to the prince's magnanimity and he might even have fallen in love with her if she had not been a gypsy. As it was, in spite of the risk he ran, he determined to have some fun.

"How much?" he inquired, holding out his hand.

The girl took his hand, but shook her head.

"The queen will tell your fortune," she said, pointing to the principal tent, at the door of which appeared a very old woman arrayed from head to foot in the most gorgeous scarlet, and adorned with ear-rings, strings of coral beads and bright feathers of Oriental birds.

But the prince was not to be lured from his horse.

"No, I want *you* to tell my fortune."

In vain did the girl declare that the hundred-year-old mother could read the hand so much better, and even offer to compromise the dignity of the queen by bringing her out to the traveler, but the prince was determined that no one but "Lal," as he ascertained her name to be, should look into the face of his fates. As the girl proceeded to comply with his request, a rough-looking man, idly swinging a riding-whip, stepped out from behind a tent and advanced to the horse's head. The prince eyed him critically, keeping his free hand on the

holster of his pistol. He also closely watched the girl, observing that for a gypsy she was quite neat. He liked her warm touch on his digits.

"You will marry," she affirmed, after looking intently at his palm.

"Undoubtedly," he responded.

"And soon."

"Possibly."

"Your wife will be very rich."

"Well, that interests me. You couldn't tell me about how much money she will have?"

"Millions. You will marry the richest woman in Marsovia."

"Well, now, Lal, that is decidedly good. You couldn't describe her, could you?"

The girl inspected his hand more closely. Then she dropped it and ran into the tent, reappearing instantly with a large book ornamented with dragon's and death's heads of sufficiently formidable appearance to raise Hecate, or to bind Mephistopheles to the service of him who used it to invoke his unholy aid. After consulting the occult philosophy, the gypsy in-

formed the prince that his lady love would be very black of hair, very red of cheeks, and very plump of form. She would be the most beautiful being he had ever beheld, and he would fall in love with her instantly. The prince thanked her and gave her a ducat, taking care not to show his store or even cause the coins to jingle. Then he rode on, the gypsy at the head of his horse making no objection. After all, perhaps the man had only intended to see that the girl should not be cheated out of her well-earned fee.

"So I am to marry a woman with millions," chuckled the rider, and, although he had the education of a prince, it was a Marsovian one, and he was superstitious enough half to believe in his good luck.

CHAPTER II

My Lordship's Pleasure

As the prince suspected, the gypsy camp marked the approach to a village. Riding out of the ravine where these half-outlaws tented, he saw the town rising on the foothills of the mountain. It was located among the rocks, for the Marsovian never builds on a rod of land which he can sow. The visit of so fine an appearing stranger brought the women to the little stone windows of the one-story houses, and drew the children into the single and crooked street. The men for the most part were away tilling the fields. The simple townspeople were farmers, clothed in homespun and riding in donkey-carts, but here was a man dressed like a king, with fine crimson bands on his cap and mounted on a horse such as tradition said the ancient knights bestrode.

Up to this time the most honored guest of the

village had been Herdi Vapin, the banker's son, who sometimes came to the little inn and danced with Sonia Danvic, universally acknowledged to be the most beautiful maiden in all the Southern Province. The young women envied her, the young men hated him, and the gossips wondered whether it would make a match. The wise old women doubted, saying that, while Sonia was the pride of the village and deserved to have a courtier, an ambassador or some what-not great man, yet she could not hope to win the banker's millions. So great a fortune could not come to one in so humble a life. Rich men, they affirmed, never wedded poor girls. As for young Vapin, he never spoke of marriage to the villagers. He talked of the great men with whom he drank, of the fine women with whom he danced, and sometimes of the farm of Sonia's father and how much or, rather, how little it would bring if turned into ducats, always shaking his head and saying it was a pity that such a pretty girl, and so graceful a dancer should be so poor.

When the stranger rode into the town, some

children hailed him as Signor Vapin. The prince smiled and inquired the way to the inn. This was soon found, although it was small, serving more as a resort for villagers than a hostlery for strangers. He alighted, and ordered a cool tankard of beer, but learned to his disappointment that the house afforded nothing but wine. "But it is too hot for wine," protested the prince. "All the people about here drink wine," he was informed by Nish, the landlord. "It makes you hot when you are cold and it makes you cold when you are hot, and so there is always an excuse for another glass. Will the gentleman have wine?" The guest rather ungraciously consented, but when Nish brought the dark red beverage, artfully beaded to tempt his disgruntled customer, the prince took a sip, made a grimace, then threw the glass out of the window.

"You do not like it?" faltered the landlord.

"Get a woman to bring it, old sour face! Such a Ganymede as you would curdle the nectar of the gods."

Quite crestfallen Nish hurried out and called

his wife, but when the prince saw her he was more surly than ever.

"Man, I want a girl; I do not want a gargoyle. Haven't you any girls in this town?"

The landlord's face grew more vinegarish, if possible, than before. "Whoever this Ganny Mede may be, or what a gargoyle may look like, I am, if I may say so, an honest wine-seller, and my wife, when I chose her, had the most superb figure in the village."

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I was speaking in figures myself. Your wife is unique. When they made her they broke the mold."

The landlord's wife decided to consider this doubtful language as a compliment, while her husband, with an eye to business, sent for the daughter of a neighbor. When the girl came he introduced her as Hilda, "a good and pretty girl who will wait on the fine gentleman." But the prince showed his displeasure by refusing to taste of the glass which she set before him. The landlord, nothing discouraged, sent out the second time. A traveler with such fine manners must be suited at any cost.

"This is Gretchen, a very beautiful girl," he said, bowing low. "I hope the master will be pleased."

The whimsical guest suffered her to bring one glass and then he summoned the landlord.

"See here, hasn't this pesky town any prettier girls than these? In the inns of Castelo the very finest girls in the city wait upon me, and am I to be put off among these rocks with a lot of wry-necks? Surely you have better girls than these?"

The landlord again bowed humbly. "There is one very beautiful girl. Her name is Sonia Danvic. But she will not wait on the gentleman. She is very proud. She did not use to be so, but since Herdi Vapin, the son of the great banker in Rovitz, has been to see her, she has grown heady and will not wait on my customers any more. It spoils the girls to have fine gentlemen come to see them."

Nish delivered this opinion with an air of wisdom, his head one side and his hands under his long, white apron. A sudden idea assumed shape in his shock head and he sidled over to

the bar and consulted with his wife. Neither of the couple was attractive. He had a pudgy face sicklied over with a half-week's growth of yellow beard, and a red mustache, so long that it drooped far below his chin. She was tall, thin, sharp-nosed and with a decidedly shrewish aspect. They were each oily to their customers and ugly to each other. After the two ill-favored heads had almost bumped each other in a whispered and excited conference, the landlord returned to his exacting customer, who sat sulking, his wine untouched. He was vexed that the banker's son should poach on his preserves, and he was a bit jealous even before he had seen the girl. But the landlord had a solace on his smooth tongue. "In this town when a girl has a birthday, she gets her friends and they come here and dance and the girls serve the men. We had a dance last night, and, if the master please, we will have one to-night. Sonia will be here and you shall see the handsomest girl in Marsovia and watch her dance and perhaps she will serve you. Will the gentleman wait?"

The prince reflected. He had started post-haste for Castelo to learn the terms of the unknown bond he carried in his pocket. He had lingered at the inn to drink and it was now past noon. If he accepted the landlord's invitation he must remain over another day.

"After all, what matters it? I am not going to sell myself for a bag of gold."

Thus deciding, he gave orders to have his horse stabled and then set about to pass the time as best he could until the evening. This was not easy in a village as small as Pech. If he walked out, the people stared; if he stayed in, the inn smelled of sour wine. At length he went to his room and slept until night and then ordered his supper sent up. Just before the hour set for the dance, he bethought himself of his commission. He had been sent out by the government to investigate the condition of the people and to learn among other things whether the farmers could endure an additional tax of a thaler on their stony acres. He should have employed his time in going about the village asking questions. But in his care-free way he

laughed at his forgetfulness, promising himself to see the fat-witted fellows at the dance.

"Perhaps they will talk more freely when their heads are giddy," he soliloquized.

The belles and beaux were now assembling for the dance. They were dressed in odd mountain costume, the men in tight white trousers and red jacket with a belt around the waist holding weapons of war which could not be laid aside even for an evening's sport. The girls also abounded in scarlet and white. They, too, were held in at the waist by a flaming belt, but instead of frowning with pistols and cartridges, it smiled with wreaths of flowers and strings of coin. Some wore colored handkerchiefs on their heads and others little red caps. The elders crowded the doors and looked in at the windows to witness the graceful motions of the more supple members of their families. One old woman, with a face grave enough to dampen the spirits of the merrymakers if they had not been so familiar with it, accosted Nish's wife in a reproving voice:

"This is not a birthday night. No one was born to-day."

"I was, Mother Refan," lied the landlord's wife.

"No, Mrs. Nish, you were born the 17th day of November, and I can tell the year, too, if you want it."

The old crone was a walking chronicle of the village events and knew every woman's birthday as well as she did her own. Nish's wife shook her forefinger warningly.

"Hush, mother, it is for the good of trade. We have a great nabob and we must entertain him."

The old woman was shocked, and she shambled off muttering. To commercialize so sacred a custom seemed to her as sinful as to break a fast day.

The room had been cleared of tables except one in the corner where the prince sat. While the musicians were tuning their instruments, Nish went over and spoke to his distinguished guest.

"That one is Sonia—the one with the red

cheeks and the big black eyes and the pink ribbons in her hair."

Others, indeed, possessed similar marks of beauty and like ribbons in their hair, but their red cheeks were not so red and their black eyes not so bright. The prince could not be mistaken. There was only one Sonia. It was not the beauty of art, but of nature; not of the hairdresser, but of health. Her little thumbs did not point downwards because she had studied a statue, or her rosy mouth show just enough of their cunning pearls because she had practiced before the glass, or her lace-edged dress come just high enough to display her splendid ankles because the dressmaker had plied her trade upon her,—all the ensemblage of her charms were as natural as those of the sweet little bird on the modest vine.

It was, indeed, her modesty that formed her chief attaction—the liquid orbs that fell when the eyes of the prince met them, the slippered feet that strove to hide behind each other when he looked at them, and the sensitive face into which soft, rich colors played when he ex-

pressed his astonishment at the vision of loveliness. He had the feeling of having missed life hitherto because he had not met her.

And then the dance—the motions, the postures, the curtsies, the little girlish arts by which the gazelle-eyed creature swayed to the sound of music and whirled in a maze of complex rhythms, now circling on one pretty toe and now gliding with noiseless feet whither the violin called. She evidently understood the art much better than the other girls, for she made them appear tame and their beaux clumsy. Only the most veteran of the young men dared to dance with her, and they with a respect one accords to his betters.

Nish, swelling with importance, had taken a position near the prince. He was immensely pleased because he saw that his entertainment was making an impression upon his irascible guest, who had been so hard to suit.

"Isn't she a stunner? Doesn't she do it fine? Look at her now!" he exclaimed from time to time, and the prince, silent at first, loath to

accord the palm to a peasant girl in an obscure town, at length burst forth:

"By my stars, she is a goddess! I have seen the beautiful belles of Castelo and the fair maids of Rovitz, but, by my soul, they cannot compare with her!"

His words were overheard by the dancers nearest him, and were quickly conveyed to the object of their flattery just as she was closing a complex fandango. She turned away her face to hide the crimson tide that flowed down to where the milk-white neck beat it back. But the prince was on his feet. He bounded across the room.

"You must dance with me. I claim you for the next dance."

He had not intended to go on the floor with these vulgarians, as they were termed by the exclusive society in which he moved. He deemed it quite beneath his dignity. But he was carried away with the witchery of the chief dancer. Besides, there was no one to see. It would never be known in Castelo, especially

if he did not reveal himself to these untraveled people.

Nish clapped his hands in his glee, and the company joined in the applause. Even the young men who hated Herdi Vapin as a rival, took the prince's impulse with good nature. The richly appareled stranger shone in a constellation so far above them that jealousy hardly ventured to leap the height. The usual interlude was abridged, so eager were the company to see the prince dance. He led out his beautiful partner and began the step with dignity befitting his rank, the other performers doing their parts but lamely in their desire to watch the chief dancers, but as the program progressed he grew excited. Her soft arms, her warm breath, her heaving bosom, her lovely face so near his, aroused him to a frenzy of passion he had never before experienced. In his intoxication of delight, he thought of Herdi Vapin, who stood possibly in the light of a lover to this graceful houri. So this was the wine the fellow had quaffed. He should never dance with her again.

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THE MARSOVIAN DANCE.

Still the infatuated pair continued to glide and to whirl.

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The prince led forth his charmer—once—twice—thrice. The faces of both were flushed with pleasure. Tired with the exhausting sport, one couple after another fell away until there were hardly any others on the floor, but still the infatuated pair continued to glide and to whirl. The man of royal blood was making a strange spectacle of himself among these unlettered peasants, but he recked not of anything. He was enjoying the most delicious slice of life his whetted appetite had ever tasted.

He was in love.

Suddenly there was a stir at the door. Some one was pushing his way through the crowd of onlookers. The prince and his partner turned to behold the livid face of Herdi Vapin.

CHAPTER III

A True Marsovian

Herdi Vapin, the young man who disturbed the peace of the merry party, was twenty-one years of age and superintendent of the Rovitz bank—its fourth position of trust—and his father was hopeful that he might rise through the offices of teller and cashier and in time become the head of that moneyed institution. The bank at this time, in response to an appeal from Prince Nikola and the Marsovian Senate, was preparing to assist the government, and hence had called in all its loans. A vast sum of money had accumulated in the vaults. Herdi had the entire charge of the bank's strong boxes.

The year previous, the young man had passed a season at Monte Carlo and become infatuated with its games. Being of an ingenious turn of mind, he had devised a scheme for beating the

great gambling house. By the simple plan of playing one color and tripling the risk every time he lost, he calculated that the tide of ill fortune must turn if the player only had the means to hold out. It was a very old system, worked a hundred times and always with failure, but he reckoned it was because its backer lacked the enormous resources necessary to make it a success. He figured that the red or black could not possibly lose twenty-five times in succession. He had purchased a roulette wheel and tried to experiment in his private room, using bits of paper for bank bills, and he had acquired a colossal fortune with his imaginary money. It only remained to convert it into real money by playing real money.

The entire financial strength of his father's bank was now in his custody, as it had never been before and would never be again, for once loaned the government it would be long before the currency would again find its way to the Rovitz vaults. It was the opportune moment. A rainy night with a noisy wind blowing afforded the occasion for the daring and stupen-

dous theft, which the young robber facetiously called an involuntary loan. Of course he would return it after it had served his purpose.

His plot was further aided by the fact that the bank authorities had taken pains to place the vast deposits in the form of bills of very large denominations so as to facilitate their transportation to Castelo whither they were to be conveyed as soon as a few legal formalities had been effected. Having control of the keys and knowing the secrets of the combination locks, he had but to send away the watchman on some errand, and then, under cover of the pitchy darkness and the howling wind, cram the huge bundles of bank-bills into his leather sacks and be off on his long and risky road. The story of what followed fell only from his own ashen lips. It was to the effect that while crossing the Dismal Mountains he had been attacked by gypsies and robbed of his precious load.

He returned to the bank before the loss was discovered and made a confession to his father.

Rudolf Vapin was shocked at his son's guilt and nearly distracted by the loss of the money. The bank was ruined, and yet to report the robbery meant also the ruin of his son. Moved by the instinct of self-preservation, his first prompting was the policy of concealment until he could decide what course it was best to pursue. The prince had arrived almost in the very hour of the awful disclosure, but he had been shunted aside for the time, and the banker breathed more freely for a day. By chance Herdi overheard some talk about the arrival of a band of gypsies, and, taking a couple of guards, he rode down to look over the camp. Finding nothing suspicious, and no clew to the highwaymen who had relieved him of his ill-gotten bags, he invited the officers to drink with him at the inn, arriving just at the time when the prince was at the consummate flush of his passionate dance with Sonia. The landlord was the first to take in the critical situation.

"Stop the dance and go to the drinks," he

cried, rushing out on the floor and getting in the way of the dancers so that they were obliged to halt.

The prince was a trifle vexed, but he understood the significance of the landlord's action, and, wiping the perspiration from his brow, led his partner to the table in the corner. Other tables were quickly put in position and the place was speedily changed from a dancing-hall to a wine-room.

Herdi and the two guards sat down at the opposite end of the room from the one where the prince was seated. The young man was in an ugly mood. It was not enough that he must lose the fortune of Monte Carlo, ruin his father and face the prison door, but here a formidable rival was threatening to capture the heart of the only woman for whom he had ever cared. Why was Prince Danilo here? Why had he not ridden with all haste to Castelo with his mysterious contract? Plainly, he was lingering because he was in love.

And Sonia, too! She had eyes only for her new and royal lover; she did not look at Herdi.

He sat sullenly sipping his wine and watching them from under his jealous eyebrows. Suddenly, a dreadful thought smote him. On his way home two nights before, after robbing and being robbed, he had stopped at the inn to brace himself for the encounter with his father. It was the celebration of Gretchen's birthday and a gay company had assembled. Sitting at a table with Sonia, yearning for sympathy in his wretched plight and his tongue unloosed by the wine, he had confided to her the story of his crime and his loss, enjoining upon her the strictest secrecy.

Now, as he beheld her head close to that of the prince, he was startled. What if she should reveal his awful secret? A new lover and a sparkling glass of wine were a potent combination. This *tête-à-tête* must be stopped at all hazards. Both his jealousy and his fear demanded it, and his muddled brain perceived only one way to accomplish it. It was a most wicked thing to do, but he had already gone too far to stop for scruples. He took from his pocket a pad and pencil and wrote a line. This

he gave to the landlord with the command that he present it to the prince.

As the wine flowed, the spirits of the company grew more and more boisterous. The young people near Sonia began to rally her upon her good fortune in having won the heart of the elegant stranger, and to congratulate her upon the prospect of some day becoming a great lady. The foolish prince, his head turned by the wine, laughingly declared he was looking for a wife, and he believed he should find her in that room.

"Is it Hilda?" joked the landlord's wife, knowing it was not. "Or Gretchen?" bantered Nish, coming forward, the note held gingerly in his fingers. "Or Sonia?" chimed half a dozen maids, pointing to the radiant being who eclipsed them.

The prince rose, laid his hand on his heart and bowed low to the beautiful girl, while she crimsoned with the greatest joy a woman can know. The tongue of the honored guest began to wag.

"The fortune-teller said I was to marry a rich and handsome woman. The banker offered me his daughter and his ducats, but she wasn't handsome. Here I am offered the handsomest girl in the world, but she isn't rich. Hang me, if I don't believe the fates have got the gold in the wrong bag!"

At that moment, Nish, frightened and bowing most obsequiously, presented the note. As he expected, it proved to be a paper bomb. The prince sobered at once. His face grew dark as a thunder-cloud.

"Who gave you that?" he demanded of the cowering landlord.

Nish pointed to the banker's son.

"I will prove it to be false and then I will make him eat the accursed lie."

He looked blackly around the room and then he held up the paper and slowly read the damning accusation. There were murmurs of dissent and protest from the astonished company. Sonia turned deathly pale.

"What do you say to this charge?" he demanded hoarsely of the landlord, who stood

shaking as one with the palsy. "Is it true or is it a base lie?"

"Why, it's a lie." He caught sight of Herdi. It would not do to offend so rich a customer. "But when I say it's a lie, I do not mean—"

"And you?" fiercely interrupted the prince, turning to the landlord's wife.

"I say it is some fearful mistake," replied Nish's wife, even more cautious than her husband. "I am sure the gentleman did not mean anything against our pure and good Sonia. He meant some other woman."

"No, it is plainly written—*Sonia Danvic.*"

On the outer fringe of the crowd stood the old crone who had deemed the day profaned because there was a celebration without a birthday. Her curiosity had been too strong for her conscience.

"And you, aged mother?" shouted the prince, as he caught sight of her imposing figure and grave face. "What do you say?"

Mother Refan raised her hand after the manner of a prophetess.

"I say the Marsovian women are the most

chaste in the world; I say the Pech women are the most virtuous in Marsovia; and I say that Sonia Danvic is the purest woman in Pech."

The old crone stepped forward as she spoke, and, with her skinny arm raised in solemn adjuration to Heaven, produced the most profound impression.

"And now," roared the prince, growing more and more angry with each denial of the vile scandal, "that we may stamp the falsehood as the most damning lie that ever went out of a coward's heart, I want to know what the entire company say. Do you confirm what this aged mother says?"

"Yes! yes! yes!" came a chorus of cries from all parts of the room, and the people grew excited, some demanding that they voice their sentiments in cheers, others by vote, and still others wanted to drink to the virtue of the most popular girl in the village.

Amid the confusion, the prince walked over to the door and took down his riding-whip. Then he approached the table where Herdi sat crouching between the officers of the law.

"Base villain, defamer of women, I'll crowd the infamous lie down your craven throat."

He jerked the young man from his chair to the floor and rained upon him blow after blow from his heavy riding-whip. Herdi drew his pistol, but the guards wrenched it from his grasp.

"It is Prince Danilo," they cried.

When the prince had punished him sufficiently, he threw down the whip and turned away. Herdi staggered to his feet.

"You have no right to deceive that girl when you've been paid to marry another woman," he hurled back at the prince as he ran out of the room.

"Paid to marry another woman! Why, you infernal villain what do you mean?"

"You've got the money in your pocket," yelled Herdi.

The prince had suspected the sealed paper to be a marriage bond, but it seemed to him a most degrading thing when the matter was put in this coarse way.

"If that is the meaning of the contract, I will have none of it."

He took the envelope from his pocket and tore it with its contents into fragments and then stamped them into the sawdust that covered the floor.

"That much for your dirty paper, and tell your father that not for a million ducats will I be bought to marry any woman."

From another pocket he took the bag of gold. But his dramatic scorn lacked one small fraction of its complete triumph. There was one ducat short. He had given it to the gypsy fortune-teller. Spending his money lavishly in his journey, he had parted with his last sou—not a very great inconvenience to a traveler of his rank who is sure of a free welcome in this hospitable land. But now he wanted the ducat sorely. He whispered to Nish, who smilingly produced it from his cash-drawer. Then the prince ran into the street and hurled the bag after the traducer. Nor was the measure of his repudiation of the lie even yet full. The vile detractor had been punished, but the chaste

victim needed to be comforted. Back he hurried into the inn where few persons now remained, the company for the most part having followed him into the street.

"Kindly leave us alone a moment," he said to the landlord's wife, indicating Sonia, who with two or three of her girl companions, stood near the door.

Nish's wife, with a significant wink to her neighbors, led them out.

The prince and Sonia were left alone. "I want to congratulate you on being rid of a scoundrel," he said, taking her hand.

"And I want to thank you," she replied, dropping her eyes.

He took both her hands.

"What I said a little while ago in jest I now say in earnest."

"That you did not believe the scandal?"

"No;—that I am looking for a wife."

"You want one who is rich?"

"No, I want one who is poor."

"That is strange."

"Not when one is in love."

"So you are in love?"

"Profoundly. I want a wife and I await my answer."

"From me?"

"From you."

"But you do not know me."

"It is you who do not know me. I am Prince Danilo."

She gave him one rapt look and then dropped her head on his shoulder.

"I do not care who you are; I love you—not because you are a prince, but because you are a man—a true Marsovian."

He folded her for a moment in his arms and then he threw open the door.

"Behold Sonia Danvic, the betrothed wife of Prince Danilo," he announced to the gossiping and gaping crowd.

A great shout went up and the people gathered around to congratulate the happy pair. Thus did Prince Danilo, true son of a knightly line, defend the chastity of Marsovian woman-

hood, personified in the fairest daughter of the land, with his utmost resources, the strength of his body, of his purse, and even of his noble name.

CHAPTER IV

A Sister's Sacrifice

Nish was rogue enough to try to turn the joyous affair to his own profit, and what he lacked in shrewdness was supplied by his sharp-nosed, sharp-tongued and sharp-witted wife. The marriage ought to be celebrated at the inn, the village-wise couple argued to the prince, and the sooner the better. As to the place, the little inn was larger than the church, and as to the time, "loose thy falcon to-day, and you may whistle in vain for it to-morrow." Sonia had lovers a plenty who wanted to marry her, and no one could tell what freak a popular and pretty girl might take into her fickle head. Besides, what sweeter revenge could Herdi Vapin seek than to try to steal the bride of the man who had beaten him?

The prince was not greatly moved by these arguments, but they suggested to him other

reasons which more impressed him. According to court etiquette, the marriage of a prince ought to take place in the royal palace at Castelo, and with state ceremonies requiring long and tedious preparation, but he knew very well that his alliance with a peasant girl would never be sanctioned by his government, and so, if he meant to marry her, he might as well do it anywhere and at any time. It would be necessary for him to return to Castelo in order to report to Secretary Dusan the results of his journey and also to make arrangements for his marriage; so, after a week's absence for these purposes, he would return for the wedding. These plans, being approved by Sonia and her parents as well as by Nish and his wife, the great event was fixed for that day the following week.

Meanwhile, counsels very unfavorable to the marriage were being held both at Rovitz and Castelo. In the former place, the Vapin family had their reasons for preventing it. It was no part of Herdi's plan to tell his father about the disgraceful affair at the inn, and he had en-

joined his companions to hold their tongues, but it was too good a story for the guards to keep, and it was soon all over the town.

With a feeling of utter despair, the elder Vapin, as soon as he heard the account, required the ducats and the marriage bond at the hand of his unworthy son. The words of the prince, when he hurled the bag of gold at the head of Sonia's traducer, had become public property, and it was freely spread around that the banker was paying well to have his daughter married, and that the headstrong Herdi by making the purchased suitor angry had spoiled his father's plans. This added further to the family disgrace.

Thus far Rudolf Vapin had concealed from the public the news that the bank had been completely looted of its funds. The combination lock was out of order; the experts at safe-opening were out of town; the heavy doors of the vault would be unbolted in a day or two. With these and other excuses he delayed the day of judgment. He was also assisted by the bank at Castelo, which made a temporary loan

on the representation that the difficulty was only a mechanical one. He had employed the most skillful detectives—those who were still of tongue as well as keen of scent—to explore every gypsy camp in Marsovia and on its borders in the hope that the money might be found and restored without the public knowledge of the crime. To save the bank from ruin and his son from prison, he offered a reward of twenty-five thousand ducats, and with so great an incentive for the sleuths he expected daily that the robbers would be run down. This was on the theory that his son's gypsy story was true, but he was by no means certain that Herdi was not lying. He was aware of his son's passion for gaming, and for all the stout denial of the young gambler, the bank's money might at that moment be locked in the unyielding coffers of Monte Carlo.

But the banker did not know the full peril of his son's break with the prince. He was not aware that Sonia Danvic shared with Herdi the knowledge of the latter's crime. The prince was to marry the peasant girl within a week.

The newly-made wife would surely reveal to her husband the terrible bank secret, the more especially as the prince was closely related to the government, which expected to borrow the funds of the looted institution.

Herdi felt that his father ought to know the peril and if possible prevent the marriage. He had other reasons why he did not want to see the girl he loved captured by another, but he had sense or shame enough to put his objections upon practical grounds. Too cowardly to brave further his father's anger, he sought an intermediary in his sister. To her he gave the account of his sorry plight after having been robbed by the gypsies, of his going to the inn to be warmed and braced by the wine, and of his incredible folly in having opened his heart to a peasant girl and revealed to her the story of his crime. He begged his sister to tell his father.

Volgotha Vapin had more mercy on her parent's gray hairs, and sought to prevent the prince from marrying Sonia by a plan of her own. A powerful friend, Sixtus Sadoya, who had been absent on business in Austria, was

expected on the morrow. He was the owner of many iron mills and was said to be of enormous wealth; it was his money that established the bank, and he was president of its board of directors. Rudolf Vapin both rejoiced and trembled at his coming. Volgotha determined to make use of him. Sadoya had been a friend of the family for many years, and, although he was twenty years her senior, there was some little prospect that the confirmed old bachelor might finally yield to the charms of the banker's daughter. He had never made love to any woman, he declared. He was proof against all the charms of the sex, but on the day of his return, after dining with the banker, Volgotha made an appeal that touched a spot under his waistcoat that seldom gave him any trouble. They had talked of the government's difficulty in raising money, of the contemplated loan from the bank, of Danilo's visit and his prospect of succeeding the reigning prince, when Volgotha said:

"By the way, the young prince is to be married."

"Indeed! And to whom?"

"To a peasant girl of Pech named Sonia Danvic."

The ironmaster shook his head.

"The powers at Castelo will never approve."

"But the prince is so headstrong he will marry whether they will or nill," declared the banker. "I hear they are to be married within a week."

"A strange union," mused the ironmaster.

"It must not be," passionately exclaimed Volgotha, completing his thought. Her lips drew together in a white line and her voice had a passionate note that surprised Sadoya. He was a stout man, square-shouldered, his face ruddy and devoid of beard. His appearance was so unlike that of the typical Marsovian that strangers paused to look at him in the street. He was of northern stock—German or possibly Swedish—no one could tell which for he never spoke of his ancestry. The lines that enclosed his eyes denoted shrewdness; those around his mouth, good-nature; those that marked his forehead, a secret trouble of which he never spoke. Possibly this was an affection of the heart, for

at the least excitement he was heard to gasp. He looked curiously at the banker's daughter.

"Are you then so interested in the future ruler of your country?" he inquired with a sly twinkle of his eye, not guessing he was so near the truth.

The banker produced the marriage bond between the prince and his daughter of which he had retained a copy, and handed it silently to his guest. He had not intended to reveal a matter that lay so near the great bank secret, but since his daughter had made so pronounced an opposition to the prince's marriage, his guest might as well understand the reason—at least, the reason that lay on the surface. The father was entirely in the dark in regard to Volgotha's motive. He thought it was to help him; he did not know it was to save her brother.

The ironmaster, on the other hand, suspected her of being in love with the prince. Sixtus read the marriage bond in great astonishment, and it did not increase his respect for the man who was willing to give so much gold to buy a title for his daughter—for Sadoya was a self-

made man and a thorough democrat. But he vented his displeasure in another direction.

"What kind of a man is Prince Danilo to engage himself to two women in as many days? The bond is dated the tenth of April, and as this is only the twelfth, he must have proposed to the peasant girl on the eleventh, or possibly on the very day he plighted his troth to your daughter."

He was addressing himself to the banker. It was so delicate a matter he did not want to look the young woman in the eye. But it was Volgotha who made reply:

"Oh, if we could only prevent the marriage!"

When he saw her distress, the ironmaster grew angry at the prince for having trifled in this way with the daughter of his old friend. But her father felt that she was going too far. There was nothing between her and the prince. The marriage bond was only a ruse to get a dangerous visitor out of Rovitz, and it was not likely that Secretary Dusan would send another bank inspector for some time. There was, indeed, the government loan. That might be

required any day, but it had to be signed by this man, Sixtus Sadoya, the president of the board of directors, and Rudolf relied upon his influence with his friend to postpone the signature for a few days, by which time perhaps the robbers would be overhauled and forced to disgorge. The marriage of the prince and the peasant girl need not prove so alarming a matter. The couple would, doubtless, go away on a bridal tour, and at any rate the ecstatic bridegroom would be too happy to concern himself with the mundane matters of a bank. Volgotha was showing altogether too much concern about the marriage. Could it be that she was in love with the prince?

"My daughter," he said in a remonstrating tone, "the matter is not so serious. Do not take it so to heart."

For reply she crossed the room and clasped him around the neck, exclaiming with a passionate cry:

"Oh, father, you do not know!"

He was perplexed, not knowing what to make of her excitement or understanding what secret

she possessed that she did not share with him.

As to the ironmaster, he was astounded. Such pathetic distress had for him but one meaning. She had been betrayed. His indignation knew no bounds. He sat silent, finding no words to express his wrath and horror. Volgotha, white with passion, turned to him:

"Oh, Sixtus Sadoya, you will save us! You will go to Pech and stop this marriage!"

"Indeed, I will."

Sadoya, powerfully moved by his sympathy for her, jumped to his feet and shook his fist.

"I will go to Pech and I will prevent this marriage. In the name of heaven, I will forbid the banns. He shall not marry another when by every right he belongs to you. If there is any virtue or righteous power in Marsovia, I will compel him to marry the woman he has wronged, even though he be a prince."

The banker sat as one dazed. He felt sure his friend had misunderstood. But why did not Volgotha set him right? Why did she submit to this shameful impeachment of her character? Why permit herself to stand before this man

as a woman false and fallen? There she stood, debased and despised, uttering no word.

"Volgotha, what does this mean?" he demanded. "Why do you not tell Herr Sodoya he is mistaken?"

"Father, let him think what he will, if only he can stop the prince from marrying that girl."

The ironmaster, now more than ever confirmed in his belief, rose to take his leave. With the sickening thought that his confidence had been misplaced, he extended his hand pityingly.

"I will stand by you; I will if possible prevent this wicked marriage," he said, not in his accustomed orotund voice, but chokingly as one who is under the spell of a horrid dream.

When he had gone, father and daughter stood alone, facing each other. Herdi had stolen out at the beginning of the conversation, and his mother, finding it too painful, had also withdrawn.

"In the name of heaven, Volgotha, what does this mean?" burst out the banker. "Why do

you stamp yourself vile in this man's sight? He thought everything of you, and there was a prospect that you might become his wife. But now you have spoiled it all."

"Father, it was to save Herdi." And then she told him of her brother's folly. "If the prince marries that girl, she will surely tell."

"And if he does not marry her, she will surely tell," he replied. "On what ground can we stop the marriage, except that he is pledged to you, and do you not think she will have her revenge on our family?"

"Then write to the prince and tell him that you hold him to the marriage bond," Volgotha suggested.

"I have a better thought," her father replied. "I will write to Marko Petrovic, his uncle. I am told he is a man of iron will and holds a tight rein over the young prince."

Volgotha accepted her father's plan, and he sat down at once and wrote the letter.

CHAPTER V

A Pawn on the Political Chessboard

All unconscious of the bars being placed against his marriage, on rode the prince, gay, smiling and very much pleased with himself. He had won a beautiful bride, and in his usual reckless mood he cared not a whit whether she were rich or poor. The high court of conventionalism would bar the ceremony out of the circle of caste, but that made small difference. After a little mild opposition, his uncle would pardon him and welcome his bride. It had been so with his cousins, Khadja and Nova Kovich, who had married peasant girls, one in secret and the other with the half-hearted assent of his relatives, but they had slipped as easily and gracefully into the manners of the court, as farm-hatched cygnets into the royal lake, and were quite as popular as born ladies. Danilo, indeed, was a prince and might meet with a

more determined resistance, but he reckoned on his strong will to beat this down. He would marry Sonia Danvic anyway. No man should prevent him.

And so he rode along, happy in his first love. All nature sympathized with his mood. The babbling stream that made sudden passes at the rocky road laughed gleefully at him, some cat-birds in the olive bushes called to him in a cry that sounded very much like "Sonia", and even the rugged mountains, bare with rock or white with snow, to the lover's imagination, nodded and told each other that Danilo had found his mate. It was not until he reached Castelo that he received a cold, cruel shock. Danilo lived with his uncle, his parents having been long dead, and, determined to beard the lion in his den, he went at once into the library and informed his formidable relative that he had engaged himself to the best and most beautiful girl in the world.

Marko Petrovic was a little, old man whose thin, iron-grey locks flowed down on his shoulders. His lips came together like a well-fitting

lid and the set of his mouth was such that one saw it was useless to try to move him once he had made up his mind. He smiled skeptically at his nephew's account of the girl he loved, and only remarked that they would go over to the palace the next day and talk the matter over with Prince Nikola and Secretary Dusan.

Danilo did not know whether he had won or lost with his uncle. He had not been prepared for exactly that kind of disposition of his love-affairs. He had expected a short argument, ending in a burst of passion on the part of one or the other, but that he would in the end have his own way, the love-sick young prince did not for a moment doubt. He had yet to learn that grave rulers and wise diplomats have their ironclad plans which are frequently disrupting to the flimsy shallops launched by fond lovers on the sea of dreams.

On the following morning he was informed that Secretary Dusan was too busy with the affairs of government and it would be another day before there could be a consultation on the matter which Danilo had broached to his uncle.

The prince deemed the affairs of his heart more important than affairs of state. He did not know that in his case marriage and politics were much the same. The banker's letter to Marko Petrovic had produced a profound impression upon the government. At a hasty council it was decided that without delay the prince should marry Volgotha Vapin. An escort was immediately sent to conduct her to Castelo and she was at that very hour on her way to court.

Danilo, quite ignorant of what was in store for him, prepared himself on the day appointed to learn his fate. Vowing that all the potentates in the world should not stay him from plucking the red rose he had found on the black knee of the mountain, he went over to the palace to defy, if necessary, the men who often at one stroke of the pen make states and break hearts. Some new government scheme appeared to be on foot, for he found the great house full of people. Among the politicians and men prominent in affairs of state, he recognized his friends Khadja and Nova Kovitch, who in-

formed him that a Marsovian embassy was about to be established in Paris and they hoped to be made attachés of the Legation. He was introduced to Popoff, the chosen ambassador, a pompous man of military bearing, who looked him over in an important way and then presented him to his beautiful wife, Natalie. Conversing a bit with her while her husband passed on to receive the congratulations of other guests, he perceived that she was gifted, artful, coy of manner and with a peculiar lure in her deep, black eyes. She would prove highly dangerous, he judged, in a flirtation.

A page appeared to summon him to the council-room. There sat the three men who held in their hands the destiny of the country. Prince Nikola was a magnificent old giant with a silver beard and long white locks. In appearance he was a born ruler. If form and feature counted for anything, it was no wonder Danilo had been proposed as his successor, for he alone among the princes bore a lordly mien resembling this splendid specimen of physical manhood.

Stefan Dusan sat between the Prince and Marko Petrovic. He possessed the most perfect manners of any man in Marsovia as well as the keenest insight into the needs of the people. He was tall, thin and handsome. A visitor needed only a moment's contact with this strong personality, listening to his lucid statements and decided views, to understand that the government of the country rested on these narrow shoulders.

Danilo's uncle, as has been already said, was thin, small and old. It was he who was the chief advocate of Danilo's fitness for the throne. Not that the keen old man believed his giddy and spendthrift nephew was exactly fit, but he held that the young man's faults would disappear with increasing years. Dusan, whose trained intellect worked with the precision of mathematics, doubted whether the mental and moral constitution of the young prince had the binding fibre of business qualities which the ruler of Marsovia ought to possess. The matter had been the subject of long debates between the three wise men, and Danilo had now been

summoned to hear what the council had decreed concerning him.

The first thing was to expel from Danilo's foolish mind all thought of the consummation of his hasty love-match. Prince Nikola, shaking back from his brow his long, white locks in a leonine toss of the head, told him it was impossible that he should marry a country wench who did not know a napkin from a kerchief, and who could not be presented at court. His uncle, in a high, tense voice, appealed to his family pride. The Petrovics were a high-born race. Their royal ichor had never been adulterated with a gill of plebeian blood. His nephew ought to be ashamed to disgrace so noble an ancestry.

But it was Secretary Dusan who made the most profound impression upon the unhappy young man. With a voice as musical as it was mighty—a sword that charmed while it slew—his remorseless logic cut the young man's decision to its very foundation. And he did it all in such a magnificent way! Talking of wars and alliances, of policies and embassies, of knights and castles exchanged for bishops and

queens on the chessboard of international politics, he caused a love-affair with a peasant girl to seem the thinnest web to be lightly brushed away by powerful reasons of state, or, if persisted in, a traitorous matter unworthy of a true son of Marsovia.

Briefly, the program was this: The young man must marry the daughter of the banker. The latter, with Sixtus Sadoya, controlled the finances of the Marsovian bank. The banker and the ironmaster were fast friends and Sadoya, the wealthiest man in the country, would do for the government whatever the other requested. An alliance with the house of Vapin, not only made certain the government loan, but it secured at a time when it was most needed, the aid of the two greatest financiers in Marsovia.

As to the young lady, she was good and beautiful; more, she was willing. She was even now, with Popoff the ambassador, waiting in an adjoining room. The marriage could take place at once. The usual preliminary forms would be waived in this case, as there were state rea-

sons why the alliance should be consummated as soon as possible.

The prince was startled to learn of Volgotha's presence. He understood now why Secretary Dusan had postponed for a day the hearing of his love-affair. It was to bring forward another bride. He was angry, not only because a wife of another's choosing had been selected for him, but also because the marriage was to be rushed with such indecent haste.

Another part of the plan related to the residence of the young prince. Because France was showing an interest in Marsovia as against Austria, a strong embassy was about to be established in the French capital, the money to pay the expenses of which would be met by the government loan from the bank at Rovitz. Danilo was to be the first attaché. He was to live in Paris with his wealthy wife, and employ his powers in ingratiating himself into the good-will of the French government. If he proved a successful diplomat, he would certainly be chosen to succeed the reigning prince.

The young prince listened in amazement as

one after another the features of his future career were mapped out for him and at the conclusion of the decree he burst out:

"But I want to live my own life. I don't want somebody else to say where I shall live and what I shall do and whom I shall marry. I won't be a diplomat and I won't go to Paris and I won't marry your rich lady."

The habitual smile did not vanish from Dusan's face. He was prepared for any amount of rebellion on the part of the pieces he had selected to play with on his political chessboard. Government measures must go through. The Senate was a unit in favor of the Secretary's policy. So little a thing as love must not stand in the way of law. The only effect of the young man's rash words was to make his invincible autocrat appeal more forcibly to his feelings of patriotism. The government needed money. Internal improvements must be undertaken, the salaries of office-holders paid, legations established at the courts of all the leading powers. The taxes were not sufficient for these purposes; more money could only come by mar-

riage. Marsovia had no young scion available but Danilo. The embassy at France needed a man of princely rank. Danilo was the only full-grown prince. His duties at the embassy would not be onerous. They would be mainly of a social nature, attending state dinners and hobnobbing with great men. Popoff would take the responsibility, and minor attachés would do the drudgery, but only a relative of the reigning prince could give the legation its proper dignity. Would the foolish young man permit a petty love-affair to prevent him from performing this imperative service to his country? If so, then he was not true Marsovian, no patriot, no Petrovic.

The young man sat dazed, stupefied, shaken. It was certainly an attractive program. A wealthy and beautiful wife, all ready without the trouble of courtship, a residence in the world's gayest capital and the congenial duties of dining and drinking. And yet it was the appeal to his country's welfare that moved him most, for Danilo was a patriot to the core. But his heart cried out for the red-cheeked girl he

had left at Pech, and who was even now preparing her bridal costume. Oh, crushed hopes! Oh, crucified love! How could he inject the poison into that fresh, trusting young soul and into his own soul as well? But the government, in the person of its three dignified and heartless heads, awaited his reply.

"I cannot decide now; I must have time to think," he moaned in response to their expectant looks.

"The bride waits."

For all Dusan's words were uttered so blandly, they had the effect of a command.

The prince leaped to his feet.

"Not to-day! Not to-day! By heaven, I will not so ruthlessly break my promise!"

"But the lady will be insulted. France will be offended. Be very careful what you do. At this moment you may be deciding the fate of your country."

The Secretary laid his hand on the young man's arm, for, in his effort to escape the iron cage of diplomacy, he was about to rush from the room. There came a loud knock at the door.

It was Popoff, the ambassador, who came to say that the lady was already affronted. She had heard Danilo's loud refusal of the wife selected for him and with her escort was making off without so much as an adieu.

"She must be detained; it will never do to permit her to leave in this mood," cried the Secretary, and, followed by Nikola and Marko Petrovic, he hurried after the rejected bride.

Danilo, left to himself, wandered aimlessly out into the anteroom where he was immediately set upon by his friends, Khadji and Nova Kovitch. The ambitious young men seized each upon a button-hole and expressed the hope that, if he had been appointed chief attaché of the French legation, he would not fail to remember them. The young prince was too much grieved with his own troubles to consider the claims of his friends, and he broke away without speaking. Near the door he encountered Natalie, who was awaiting her husband. The beautiful woman smiled upon him.

"Am I to congratulate you?" she inquired glowingly.

"Commiserate me rather," he replied gloomily.

"I overheard something of your love affair and I am sorry for you," she said pityingly, laying a little, gloved hand on his arm.

"Oh, dear lady, I am broken-hearted!"

The young prince, who was a man of strong emotion, actually wept. Natalie was deeply touched. She sought to comfort him.

"You are to live in Paris, the gayest city in the world."

"I am to live in torment."

"And you are to have a wealthy wife—that is you were to have, but you must sue for her now."

" I hate her."

"And you are to associate with great men."

"I hate all men, especially great ones."

"But there are beautiful women in Paris."

"There is only one in all the world for me."

The conversation came to an abrupt end as the sound of footsteps was heard in the corridor. Danilo peered through the glass door and saw the three mighty men of Marsovia return-

ing and bringing with them the bride they had chosen for him. Reckless and desperate, he dashed out of a door on the opposite side of the room.

CHAPTER VI

The Substitute Bridegroom

In the little town on the mountain's spur, the preparations for the wedding went on merrily.

The proud hamlet, giddy with the honor conferred upon it, fairly leaped for joy. A prince —mayhap Marsovia's future ruler—had chosen his wife among Pech's humble daughters. At a mass meeting of the people over which the burgomaster presided it was voted that the village should expend twenty thalers in celebration of the great event.

Nish and his sharp-witted wife were in their highest element. The excited little landlord lost no opportunity to impress upon everybody the fact that it was he who made the match, his fertile brain that suggested the birthday dance that brought the lovers together, and his good, home-made wine that warmed the prince to the marriage proposal. For his invaluable services

he ought to receive a reward—nothing less than the post-office at Pech or a clerkship in the government-house at Castelo.

The entire little village had given itself a holiday. The spinning-wheels ceased to hum, not a farmer drove his team afield and the stone school-house, perched like a toy castle on a crag, stood silent and deserted. Only one discordant note jarred on the festal scene. Mother Refan, the old crone, declared the auguries were not propitious. In dressing a chicken for the feast, the wish-bone had broken in the wrong place, and, although she had brewed a dozen cups that morning, the tea-grounds would not properly settle. But no one paid any attention to the old woman as she moped about, shaking her grizzled head and muttering that she hoped the prince would be as good as his word.

No word had, indeed, been received from the distinguished bridegroom, but this fact caused no apprehension in a mountainous region where messengers were seldom employed, and the mails were few and slow. The prince was expected at five in the afternoon, the time set

for the ceremony. This early hour gave ample time for the music, dancing and feasting, which would fill the evening.

And so, all unaware that the golden sun of that gala day did but mock them, the merry-makers went on with their festal preparations. Those who believed in a kind Providence and not in a cruel fate beheld only a lucky traveler in the rider who drew in his steaming horse at the inn door a scant moment before the town-clock marked the hour for the wedding rites. The uninvited guest was rotund of form and florid of face, and looked like a messenger of good cheer, rather than of evil things. Yet he bore unwelcome news. He was the ironmaster of Rovitz who had come to forbid the banns.

Sixtus Sadoya had passed an unhappy week. It was not so much the disagreeable duty of breaking rudely in upon a solemn ceremony and spoiling the bliss of two young hearts at the marriage altar that gnawed on his soul and haunted his sleep,—it was the thought that the honor of a home had been violated and that its daughter, whose friendship he had cherished,

could never again be to him other than an erring and debased creature. He had never fully made up his mind to offer himself to Volgotha, although she came as near his ideal as any woman he had ever met. Possibly, like many another sluggish suitor, he needed a rival to kindle his dormant affection. In his case the rival had come, and had left a trail of fire.

Sadoya had not called at his friend's house since the sad day he had learned of the social tragedy, and he did not know that Volgotha had been summoned to court to marry the prince. Several times he had gone to the bank and he had been surprised at the smallness of its visible currency and the difficulty he had experienced in getting large checks cashed. He observed also the worried expression on the face of the banker, but this latter circumstance he attributed to the desolation of a happy home; it did not occur to him there could be anything wrong with the affairs of the bank. What puzzled him more than anything else was the banker's attitude towards the government loan. It was certainly to the interest of Rudolf Vapin

that the deal should be effected. The loan was safe, the interest was sure, the responsibility was less than with other investments and the work of keeping the accounts of one debtor rather than many was much lighter. And yet, for some mysterious reason, his friend on one pretence or another had thus far held him back from signing the papers. The money for the canceled mortgages was not yet all in (so ran the banker's demur), the bonds did not specify at what place the interest was to be paid, and it was a question whether the members of the Senate as well as the officers of the Government should not sign the guaranty. Rudolf Vapin had at first been eager for the loan; why did he now dally and quibble?

The ironmaster was revolving these matters in his mind when he came in sight of the little mountain hamlet, and he began to concentrate his thoughts upon the unpleasant task before him. The sun was just setting behind a towering mass of rock and, in its sombre shadow, the traveler beheld a solitary horseman. It was

Nish, who had borrowed the burgomaster's horse and ridden down to escort his royal guest to the bridal. For a moment he mistook the ironmaster for the prince, until the former said:

"Well, my man, are you looking for somebody?"

"I am looking for Prince Danilo. I am the landlord of the inn where the prince is to be married to-night." The little man swelled with pride as he uttered these words. Then, as he looked on the large, manly features of the traveler and surmised that he might be a relative of the prince: "And you—are you coming to see the wedding?"

"I am coming to stop the wedding."

Nish nearly fell off his horse at the startling announcement. "What do you mean?" he inquired, turning pale.

The feast would be spoiled if the man performed what he threatened. Perhaps the town council would refuse to reimburse the landlord for the expense he had undergone.

"I mean that the prince has no right to marry

this girl. Let him marry the one whose husband he is in the sight of God."

Nish winced before the man's thunderous tone and the lightning that flashed from his eyes.

"But, surely," Nish whined, "you would not interfere with the marriage of a prince. I have even heard that Prince Danilo will be the ruler of Marsovia. You had better not cross him."

The traveler laughed cynically.

"The government had better not cross me. It owes me too much."

"Who are you?" faltered the landlord.

"I am Sixtus Sadoya, the ironmaster of Rovitz."

Nish had heard of the great financier. He had heard rumors also of a government loan, and he understood how a millionaire is often greater than a ruler. He wheeled his horse and rode silently back with the disturber of his peace. He knew enough to keep his own counsel. It was not policy to reveal the stranger's errand and he whetted his wits to contrive how

the feast might go on even if the wedding failed.

When they reached the inn, the wedding party was already in sight. Sonia was attended by Hilda and Gretchen, and three young men followed, all tricked out in holiday attire. Marching along between wreaths of leaves and festoons of flowers—for the single street of the hamlet was a long lane of decorations—they were hailed on every side by laughing groups of young people, all showering bouquets and well-wishes on the bride.

A great mass of gossips—principally the older women—too curious to see the approach of the bridal party to stay inside, and too fearful of losing their places if they waited outside, blocked the entrance to the inn; and, amid this crowd of eager guests, Sixtus Sadoya found himself wedged in such a way that he came face to face with the bride, and truly those honest, yet shrewd eyes, which had never yet sent lying message to woman, and never been deceived in return, were rewarded with a vision of fantastic yet genuine beauty and grace. Dressed in a fluffy mass of white, over which

dangled a motley array of ornaments—for every friend had insisted upon hanging for luck either a string of flowers or a coin around her neck—she brushed up so fairy-like against the ironmaster that he could with difficulty resist the impulse to seize one of the little, white-slippered feet and help it over the huge door-sill of the inn. But it was not her dress that smote him with a spell. His critical eye traveled quickly over its bizarre features and rested upon a face the like of which he could have sworn did not exist outside of a picture gallery. The face that was so round and rosy, the eyes that were so dark and deep, the lips that were so coy and red—why, she was the supreme type of the happy rustic bride, the ever charming theme of poets and painters! "A bride that would tempt St. Anthony!" he exclaimed to Nish, who was puncturing him with an elbow-point.

"You wouldn't spoil so pretty a wedding, I hope," entreated the landlord, trembling lest the unbidden guest might at any moment thunder out his objection to the marriage, and trying

with his little person to block the path of the large intruder.

The ironmaster vouchsafed no reply. He could not help thinking what would have been the result if he had seen this angelic face before it had been too late. In that case he might himself be standing in the coveted place of this man who had no right to wed her.

But was it too late? He was there to forbid the banns. If he stopped the marriage with the prince, what then? She would be free. But would she smile upon his suit? No woman ever forgave the man who broke so rudely her bridal.

The wedding party was now in place. The priest in his white robes stood ready. But where was the prince? The clock pointed to five minutes past the hour. The people waited patiently. Journeying over these rough mountain roads, a man, even a bridegroom, might well be late. But the delay grew ominous. The hush that had marked the moment of expectancy changed into a buzz. Some even whispered that perhaps the prince would not come. At length there was a stir at the door. Every

head turned to behold the belated bridegroom. Instead, two strangers crowded their way between the surprised guests. They were Khadja and Nova Kovich. When Danilo wanted a messenger, these rival candidates for court favor, each hoping for greater plums from the hand of his prince, insisted upon being appointed to ride the lone mountain way, and so both were accepted.

Pressing their way through the crowd to the side of the bride, in a few words they related their errand. The prince was very sorry, but he could not come. For reasons of state, the marriage could not take place. Would the beautiful maiden forgive him? It was awkward for her and terrible for him, but a prince was obliged to yield to his country's demands.

Sonia did not faint. She gave one low moan, the color fled out of her cheeks and she leaned heavily on her bridesmaids. The startling news ran in a mighty whisper around the room. What a shocking thing! What a wicked prince! Poor Sonia!

"Never you mind, Sonia," said Gretchen, who

was one of the bridesmaids; "any of our men would be proud to marry you."

"Would they?" cried Sonia, recovering command of herself, and her eyes flashing with resentment against the whole sex of the one who had outraged her, "I will put them to the test." She pushed aside the women about her, and, stepping upon one of the low Marsovian chairs, addressed herself to the wondering assembly:

"Men of Marsovia," she called in defiant and scornful tones, while her face burned red with indignation, "what peasant among you is so humble as to be willing to wed Sonia Danvic, the discarded plaything of two fine gentlemen? She is yours for the asking. Come, men of Pech, do not delay the merry-making. What! no one offers himself? Then, maidens of Pech, I will outdance any one of you for your lover!"

There was an involuntary clutching of partners among the girls, who saw wonderment dissolving into pleased anticipation on the faces of the young men. However, before any of the gallants recovered from his bewilderment, the manly form of the ironmaster pushed to the

front, and, taking the hand of Sonia he stepped on the chair beside her.

"If you will include one who is not Marsovian born, but whose life and fortune are bound up in the destinies of the country, who is of peasant stock like yourself, and who scorns the acts of such gentlemen as you have mentioned, I accept your offer, my brave maiden."

"The ironmaster of Rovitz, Marsovia's only millionaire!" several voices ejaculated in the crowd.

Sonia was abashed when she realized who it was that had taken up her gage with such dignity and delicacy. Nevertheless she summoned up courage sufficiently to murmur: "I have spoken in anger and humiliation, my lord, but I will not retract my word. I will be a true wife to you, for I realize that you are a true man."

"Sonia, my poor girl," cried her father, a man as dignified in carriage and appearance as the ironmaster, "do not be rash; my home is always open to you. Do not let it be said that a Danvic married for money alone."

Rige Danvic was a plain farmer, his speech as honest as the bark of the watch-dog on his ten-acre farm.

"No, it is not for money I marry this gentleman," said Sonia, "nor even for spite. It is for protection, no less against liars and betrayers than against myself. I fear that if the prince should return with a plausible tale, I should not be able to resist him. Oh, the evil spell of that dance! I shall never dance again until I am strong enough to lure the hearts of deceiving men without losing my own!"

CHAPTER VII

The Death of the Ironmaster

Danilo, chafing like a caged lion, his emotions torn between love of country and love of Sonia, could not until the last moment decide to surrender his bride. Then he posted off Khadja and Nova Kovich with the fatal message that caused his betrothed to become Madame Sadoya instead of Princess Petrovic. He had not warmed towards the banker's daughter; he had thus far even escaped meeting her in Castelo. She, resenting his conduct, could only with the greatest difficulty be kept at court. To the oily-tongued Popoff, the new French ambassador, and his charming wife Natalie had been assigned the delicate task of soothing the ruffled feelings of the slighted lady.

The government was also concerned about its promised loan. The money was sorely needed in the Marsovian treasury. Marko Petrovic

called at the palace to urge that Danilo be sent to hurry up the dilatory bank officials. Secretary Dusan objected that it would be highly unsafe to take the gunpowder so near the fire—in other words, to send the prince so near the peasant girl he wanted to marry. But Marko Petrovic had a ready reply. Sonia Danvic had become the wife of another man. When the Secretary lifted his astonished eyebrows, his informant sent for Khadja and Nova Kovich, who confirmed the statement. When the two office-seekers perceived that the news pleased the government, they sought to give themselves credit for the affair, each rivaling the other in his claims as a diplomatic match-maker.

There was now, therefore, no obstacle in the way of sending Danilo to learn the cause of the bank's delay, and he was accordingly dispatched with instructions to inform the Rovitz financiers that the government's need was urgent. As he rode down the slopes towards the sea, his thoughts turned more and more upon the woman he loved. He had not learned of her marriage to the ironmaster. Khadja and Nova

Kovich had been too wise to inform him, knowing that a lover would be as ugly about a stolen bride as a dog over a snatched bone. They had made their report to his uncle, and Danilo, fearing it would be too painful, did not care to hear about the distressing errand.

So he rode along, singing softly, and trying to make himself believe he was happy even if his love-affair had gone wrong. As he drew near her village, he became possessed with an irresistible desire to see the girl who had so narrowly missed becoming his wife. When he reached the spur of the mountain on which Pech was situated, he unwittingly pulled the bridle of his horse in the direction of the cross-road. Now the little inn was in sight. He would send for Sonia, they would drink together, and over the sparkling wine he would explain why he could not marry her. It was dangerous, he very well knew. With her hypnotic face so close to his, the whim might seize him and he might send for the priest and be married then and there. He did not think he would do anything so foolish, but then, he chuckled to himself, love

has its possibilities which no man can foresee.

Leaping from his horse, he entered the inn and looked around as if he expected to see her waiting for him. But the little hostlery proved as empty as the deserted street. Men and women, a little girl informed him, were in the potato-fields. His disappointment only whetted his desire, and he determined to ride out to the farms, even though he found the idol of his heart in a coarse gown and barefoot. He had seen women in that garb, dropping the tubers for the coming crop. As he drew near the fields, he met Nish, mounted on a bony horse. The little innkeeper was returning to catch the noon-day flow of trade, which was small enough because most of the farmers remained at their work all day.

Nish was astonished out of measure at the unexpected meeting. To his mind the prince had come but for one purpose. It was to marry Sonia. The situation was exceedingly awkward.

"Where is she?" inquired the prince, after the landlord had saluted.

"Why, don't you know?" Nish edged away.

"Why, fellow, how should I know?"

"I hope your lordship won't blame me," said Nish.

The cowardly little landlord kept stepping his horse further away. The prince took the alarm. Some mishap had befallen her. Perhaps, in her keen disappointment, she had taken her life.

"Has anything happened to her?" he demanded in an agitated tone.

"Yes, something has happened to her, but, believe me, your lordship, I couldn't help it; I did all I could to stop it."

"Well, what is it?"

The prince was now thoroughly alarmed.

"Ask her father. He is the man over there nearest the road."

And while the prince turned his head to look, the craven innkeeper galloped away. Much disturbed, the prince rode over to the place where Rige Danvic and his family were toiling and he observed with much concern that the one he sought was not among them.

"Where is your daughter Sonia?" he de-

manded, after the customary greetings. "I do not see her with you in the field."

"And you will never see her with us again in the field," replied the old farmer with a touch of sadness; "she has been taken beyond the reach of your lying prince," for Rige supposed that Danilo was another court messenger, such as Khadja and Nova Kovich.

The prince was now quite confirmed in his fear that Sonia was dead. His heartless desertion had killed her. Khadja and Nova Kovich had probably delivered his message in a cold-blooded way.

"I am sorry—very sorry," he said. "The prince did not think she would take it so hard, and if he can do anything to repair the mischief he has made, I am sure if you will come to Castelo, the government will give you a place on his recommendation."

Rige Danvic straightened up on his potato-hill.

"I want no office he can give me. If my government will let me till my land in peace and not tax me to death, that is all I ask."

The prince turned sorrowfully away. Remorse bit him sore. In a little hollow, not far from the road, he saw a new-made grave among some white-gleaming headstones, and he doubted not that the body of the girl his perfidy had slain mouldered there on the bleak mountain.

But soon his spirits returned. Youth was yet too strong for unavailing grief. He began to think of the duty before him. Here, too, was an unpleasant task. He was soon to meet the man whose bond he had broken, whose daughter he had scorned and whose son he had thrashed. His errand to the banker appeared almost in the light of a favor to be requested of him. The government might have sent a more suitable man, he reflected. He would have declined the hateful commission but for his fond anticipation of seeing Sonia. Now that his hopes had turned to ashes, he heartily wished himself well out of the whole business.

His interview with the banker was very short and frigid. Neither made allusion to his personal grievance. The prince was curtly in-

formed that Sixtus Sadoya was the man he needed to see, and as soon as the president of the board of bank directors signed the legal papers, the money for the government loan would be forthcoming. His task seemed easy enough, until, going to the Rovitz inn in search of his man, he learned that the great financier had departed for Paris the previous week.

He understood now the cynical smile on the face of the banker when the latter directed him to see the ironmaster. But the prince belonged to the class of determined men who, instead of yielding to difficulty, are only aroused by it. Love of pleasure was his weakness; not fear of work. He dictated a long message to Paris, setting forth the urgent needs of the government, and he made such an appeal to the motives of patriotism that the ironmaster telegraphed that he would immediately start for home.

While awaiting the return of the financier in the hotel at Rovitz the prince had ample time to consider the subject of his marriage. Sonia was dead, and love no longer counted. If he married Volgotha Vapin, it would mean

money in his pocket and material aid to his government. He determined to go home and surrender himself to the government and the lady. He was just uttering the sigh of a martyr when he beheld a sight that transfixed him with consternation and awe.

The door had noiselessly opened and a woman in white stood before him. It was the form of the one he had mourned as reposing in the graveyard at Pech. But was it a spirit? Now that he observed the figure more closely, it did not look like a ghost. French gloves were on its hands, and the white gown with which it was clothed was of silk, and of the latest fashionable cut. He could not speak, he only gasped:

"Sonia!"

"Danilo!"

The lips that breathed his name with involuntary tenderness were real flesh and blood.

"But you are dead!" he exclaimed.

"No,—only dead to you."

Then, as he rose up, eager to clasp her radiant form in his arms, she drew back.

"Pardon me, this is my husband, Sixtus Sadoya."

Absorbed and astonished by what seemed to him a vision, he had not noticed the man who had slowly advanced behind her, and the hand he held out in acknowledgment of the introduction was but cold, dead flesh. Nor was the other's greeting over cordial. This man, to the ironmaster's mind, had betrayed the daughter of his friend, the banker. He had forsaken another woman at the marriage altar. Hardest of all to be forgiven, he was the man Sonia loved. The hands of the men met, but their eyes glared.

How the prince hated his successful rival! Her husband! She was not dead, but married; and this was the depth of her love for him? She had taken another the moment he failed her. His grief turned to rage. His jealousy drove him almost insane and he wanted to kill the usurper of his affections. But he must not imbrue his hands in blood here at the inn,—not, at least, until his business was transacted. Then, the government loan effected, he did not care what became of him. He would kill him-

self or this other man. The two could not live in the same world.

"What did I understand your name to be?" he inquired, biting his lip until it bled in his effort to control his feelings and be polite. In his profound emotion he had not listened to the stranger's name.

"Sixtus Sadoya. I am the man you are anxious to see. You telegraphed to me in Paris."

"You are Sixtus Sadoya!"

"I am he. You telegraphed to me in Paris, and I am here."

With open mouth the prince continued staring at him.

"You are her husband?"

"I am her husband. We were married when you failed to appear."

The prince partially drew a pistol from his belt.

His humiliation was greater than he could endure. He must bow to this man who had stolen his bride—a lion tamely licking the hand that robbed it of its mate. Why submit to this

galling decree of fate? Why not end everything with a flash of powder? What mattered it whether or not the government secured its loan? When love failed, life was not worth the living.

But he choked down the lump in his throat and replaced his weapon. Then they sat down, and he produced the papers, which the merchant readily signed, Sonia tantalizingly holding the end of the pen in her little white fist while her husband wrote. Sixtus thrust the documents in his pocket.

"I will affix the seal at the bank," he said, and thither at once the men repaired.

The ironmaster informed the banker that he wanted to show the prince the money in the vaults in order that the government might have no doubt of the ability of the institution to make the loan. In reality he wanted to see the money himself. Rudolf Vapin with white face summoned his son.

"Will you not come with us?" the bank director said courteously to its president.

"No, I beg to be excused; I am not feeling well to-day."

"Nor am I," replied Sixtus, laying his hand upon his heart. "I cannot stand so much excitement, and after I finish this business, I will lie down awhile."

The banker lay down on the sofa; as he did so he saw his son, who was attired in conventional Parisian costume, deftly slip a pistol into his pocket. The father started up as it were to protest, and then lay back with a groan. The three other men went below, Herdi leading. He held a lantern in one hand and in the other a bunch of keys. Opening the outer door, he led the way into the dimly-lighted basement. The young man wore a sinister expression on his dark face, and furtively glanced at the man who had punished him. The prince kept him well in eye.

In the room directly above, the banker, leaning his wrinkled brow on his shaking hand, intently listened. He knew that his hour had come. Thus far he had been successful in concealing the bank robbery. After he had procured the services of mechanical experts to open the doors whose locks Herdi had purposely

thrown out of order, he had been lucky enough to find one safe untouched by the reckless young bank-looter. With the twenty thousand ducats it held, he had carried on the usual business and kept hidden the awful secret.

But now he was at the end of his rope. The time of exposure had come. In five minutes he would be arrested and within the hour he and his son would be committed to jail. Rudolf Vapin had not, indeed, taken the money, but he had concealed the robbery, and in so doing had become accessory to the crime.

He listened intently, fearfully, wondering what was taking place in that room, which, because of its supposed treasure, had become the center of government interest.

Presently he distinguished voices in altercation and then the sound of a struggle. Then a pistol shot. Then a heavy fall. Then footsteps were heard rushing up the stairs and the prince shouting:

"Help! the ironmaster is locked in the vault!"

Rudolf Vapin, followed by all the clerical force of the bank, ran down into the basement.

In the semi-darkness he could not make out what had occurred. Lights were quickly brought. On the stone floor lay an overturned lantern with its candle extinguished and near by a still smoking revolver The vault door was closed, and, although the banker and his men shouted repeatedly no sound came from within. Search was made for Herdi, but the young villain had made good his escape. Lock-experts were again in requisition, but it was half-an-hour before they could be procured and quite another hour before the complications could be solved. When, at last, the heavy doors swung back, they revealed the imprisoned man lying prone on his face. A long red gash disfigured his right temple. There was no mark of bullet-wound. But he was dead. The physician said he had died of heart disease.

CHAPTER VIII

Marry for Money? Never!

When Prince Danilo reached home on the following day after his adventure at the bank, he learned that the proposed embassy to France had become an established fact. Popoff and his wife Natalie were already residing in Paris, and Secretary Dusan and Marko Petrovic had also gone to that city in order to get the diplomatic relations well established. It was, therefore, several days before the prince could make his report, and when he did so he was mortified to find that it was not exactly what was expected of him. Dusan and Petrovic asked some embarrassing questions. That the peasant girl was married and the ironmaster dead, they already knew, but these facts were important only so far as they affected the government loan.

"You say he signed the documents before he

died," said the secretary. "Then where are they?"

"He took them to the bank to affix the seal."

"And was it affixed?"

Danilo shook his head.

"The tragedy occurred and we thought no more about it."

"Who then has the papers?"

"I presume his widow."

"You did not request her to surrender them?"

"I did not."

The secretary looked at him reprovingly. But his shrewd old uncle began a line of questioning still more embarrassing to the luckless young man.

"This woman—Sonia—she was married to the ironmaster?"

"Yes."

"And her husband is dead?"

"Yes."

"And she gets his millions."

"I presume she does."

"How many?"

"I do not know—twenty, I have heard."

The little, bald head of Marko Petrovic glowed with its brilliant idea. "You love her?"

"I—ah—I did," he stammered, turning red.

"And she loves you?"

"I am sure she did."

"Well, then, why don't you marry her?"

Marko Petrovic looked at the secretary and both smiled. The prince sat silent, thunderstruck at the proposition from so unexpected a source.

"It is a master stroke," declared the secretary to his chief adviser, "and worthy to have emanated from a statesman like you. By this marriage the money not merely becomes a loan to the government, but it is practically a gift. A woman's millions are more easily managed than a man's."

But Danilo's eyes flashed with indignation.

"Marry her for her money—never!" His uncle gently laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"Marry her for love."

"For love!" roared the prince, jumping to his

feet. "When I wanted to marry her for love, you prevented me by all the means in your power. Now you want me to marry her for money and I will not."

He left the palace, storming loudly against the men who could never be moved except by mercenary motives.

Secretary Dusan was not at all discouraged. The following day he invited Danilo to dine with him. After dinner, over the wine and cigars, he talked to the young man in the confidential and winning way for which he was noted and which enabled the wise old statesman generally to carry his plans.

The young widow was the saving plank in the sinking fortunes of wrecked Marsovia. The government sorely needed the money that would come by this windfall. And as for her marriage with the ironmaster, why, Providence had arranged the entire affair. Had Danilo wedded her on the day set for the ceremony, he would have remained as poor as a crow. But now he would have the richest wife in the land. It had all been planned by a higher power. The lucky

young man, the favorite of fate, had only to accept its smiling decree.

"But so soon after her bereavement! It is indecent," he objected.

"Not at all," the secretary assured him. "She was yours in the first place. That marriage with the ironmaster was only a vulgar interruption—a pause until Fortune could shower her with a lap full of gold. Now the propitious goddess says, 'Go on with the wedding.' She did not love the ironmaster, she loves you. She wants to marry you and you want to marry her. Her father could not give her a dowry and so fate has come to the rescue."

Thus the secretary went on, painting with his tongue and pointing with his hand, attributing the young prince's golden opportunity now to Providence and now to fate, but beseeching him to take it by whose ever favor it came. At length, Danilo yielded so far as to say that he would return to Pech or Rovitz or whatever place in which the young widow had taken up her abode, and ask her for the papers her husband had signed.

"And ask her also to be your wife," urged Dusan.

"What, when she was so ready to become the wife of another! When she accepted the hand of the first man who came along!"

The prince grew excited.

"It was but natural," the secretary said soothingly; "she was vexed, disappointed, cut to the heart, and in the excitement of the moment she hardly knew what she was doing. You say she accepted the hand of the one who first came along, but that one happened to be the richest man in the land and the only one who can save our country from impending disaster. God loves Marsovia and he makes you his agent to restore her fallen fortunes. Go now and seek this woman, and tell her you love her still and ask her to be your wife. Never mind if one did come between you for a brief time. Do not wreck your happiness and embarrass your government for so trifling a matter."

But the prince remained sore and stubborn on this point. He agreed to ask the young widow for the papers, but he would make no further

promises. He intended to be a frozen statue in her presence, as he had no doubt she meant to be an icicle in his.

Dusan and Marko Petrovic thought differently. With serene satisfaction they beheld the prince ride away on his third errand to the Southern Province. They believed that the young lovers had but to meet, and they would throw themselves into each other's arms, and all would be forgiven. The prince would come back engaged or married to the wealthy widow, and Marsovia would get her millions.

Danilo went first to Pech. There he learned that he need go no further in search of Sonia, for after the funeral rites of her husband she had returned to Paris.

"She is no more for the likes of us plain folks," Nish's wife informed him. "She says she couldn't live in Pech after having lived in Paris. And as for our inn, she says it wouldn't fill her bedroom in Paris. My land! but isn't she swimming in gold? She just throws money around as if it were corn and we were hogs!"

Nish, striving to turn the gossip into a prac-

tical channel, took up his wife's thread of talk as she dropped it to wait on a customer.

"She says she'd rather live a week in Paris than a year in Pech. And she's made us all sick of the hard, lone life we have here on the mountain. I've been thinking, prince, that I'd like to go to Paris, too. Why couldn't I be a messenger or something to the new embassy that's being formed? They say, prince, that you're going to be a mighty man in Paris and have things your own way. I'm sure, my dear, good prince, that I nearly worked my hands off for your wedding, though it didn't come off. But that wasn't my fault."

The prince good-humoredly promised him the coveted position, and then rode on in the hope that the widow might have deposited the documents with the banker. At Rovitz, the excitement attending the bank tragedy had died out. Herdi had returned with his story. It was to the effect that when the three men were coming out of the vault, he, in the darkness, supposing the others were ahead of him, closed the door and could not re-open it when he discovered his

mistake and ran as fast as he could for a skilled mechanic.

The account seemed plausible and was generally believed. There was one point in his son's story that troubled the banker. It was not that the gash in the ironmaster's head and the pistol shot were unaccounted for, but it was the fact that the three men were *coming out* of the treasure-room when the mishap occurred.

Then, had the prince seen that the vault was empty?

When Herdi assured him that such was not the case, he breathed more freely for all it threw discredit on the story. But the banker did not care to inquire too closely into the painful affair.

The prince did not tarry long with the banker. When he learned that the widow had not been to the bank nor in any way communicated with it, he called at the inn where the unfortunate ironmaster had made his home. None of the dead man's effects had been left there. The prince then returned from his fruitless errand.

When he reached home with the intelligence

that Sonia had gone to Paris, he found that the news had preceded him. She was now a woman of so much importance that her journeys were reported in the public press. Dusan was in a fret lest some gay and mercenary Frenchman should marry the charming and unsophisticated young widow, and come and bear off to France her millions that naturally belonged to Marsovia. The secretary insisted that the prince should attach himself to the embassy without a day's delay. He had arranged with Popoff that the young man should live in the house with the ambassador.

Natalie was instructed to insinuate herself into the good graces of Sonia, and invite the wealthy widow for a long visit to her house. Thus did the old adept in statecraft plan to have the refractory lovers under one roof. That a speedy marriage would ensue, no one who knew a line of love could doubt.

Danilo, ignorant of the rosy snare laid for his unwary feet, hastened his departure to escape scenes that were too full of sorrowful suggestions. With him went Khadja and Nova

Kovich as lesser attachés of the embassy, and also Nish, its messenger, the prince having recommended the men, and the government, in its anxiety to hurry him off, granting his every request. And so at last the prince was off for Paris—Paris that held the medicine of forgetfulness—those opiates for the pangs of disappointed love: laughing, dancing women; sparkling, bubbling wine; careless, rollicking song.

CHAPTER IX

Maxim's

As Paris is the center of the world's gayety so Maxim's is the capital of Parisian fun. Thither gravitate the spendthrift American, recklessly showering francs about him as if, being fractions of a dollar, they are negligible currency; the insular Englishman, growling at the enchanting scene while wishing he could transplant it to London; the French paterfamilias, in riotous protest against too much domesticity; old beaux seeking a new sensation to tickle their paralyzed palates; tired-eyed youths on whom the world has already palled; —all drawn to the famous restaurant by the law of social attraction.

Here everything delights. It is the heart-beat of pleasure-mad Paris. Perfumed palms give a tropical odor to the atmosphere, and the marble flesh of Venuses gleams white behind

the dark, drooping ferns, while from the gay friezes on the walls, alluring faces of dancing women tip-toeing on champagne bottles look down on the exhilarating scene. Decorative genius dares to the line of vulgarity, but does not press beyond it. Discretion, good taste, French morality, are never over-stepped. No introductions are necessary in this liberty hall. You talk, you dance, you drink with whom you please.

As the night wears on the music of the red-coated band becomes more alluring. It thrills the nerves, it warms the blood, it fires the brain, and of course the intoxication runs to the feet, inviting the waltz, and presently, lured by the seductive strains, laughing couples are swaying rhythmically with swishing feet upon the polished floor.

If you think that life is not worth living, a night at Maxim's will set your doubts at rest. You are overwhelmed by the sipping, sipping influence of pleasure, the atmosphere that is saturated with good cheer, the electricity that gives off flashes of wit in the pure joyousness

of living. *La joie de vivre* is the note at Maxim's.

As moths are attracted to the candle flame, so was Prince Danilo to this brilliant restaurant. The riotous scene suited his dejected spirits. His love-affair had gone wrong, and like a baffled ship he had turned aside from his course and put into this gay port. What mattered it whither he went, since the wind of destiny forbade him to sail on to the only harbor where he cared to enter? He laughed the cynical laugh of the defeated, and mocked in turn the cruel fate that had mocked him. Some old bores at the hotel had gossiped of the Maxim eyes that intoxicated one like wine, and of the Maxim kiss that was the cure of care. So the prince went his way to Maxim's.

And, truly, the rumor of the place had not been exaggerated. The music, the lights, the choice wines, the whirling feet, the ringing laughter, the imperturbable waiters, the money in showers, the flirtations;—all contributed to chase away the disappointment from his wrinkled brows, and he felt himself floating like a

cork on this phosphorescent and shoreless sea of pleasure. Especially was he enamored of the hired habituès of the place—fair girls with full busts, plump arms, bewitching eyes and short skirts. Here merriment was made by machinery, care went with the winds, and the pain of life was eased by song and dance and drink.

The girls introduced themselves by such names as they pleased to assume—Lo-lo, Clo-co, Do-do, and Frou-frou—and the prince fixed them in his mind by some alluring mark. He loved them all in a maudlin way. Wealth of golden hair, stealth of white arms, liquid eyes of blue, and pretty feet that darted out in the most amazing manner,—all impressed his cloudy brain, and as the wine in his glass grew less, his cup of comfort filled to overflowing.

But suddenly there was an interruption. An apparition appeared on the prince's blurred vision. A man, short of frame, bald of head, pop-eyed, and with a long, red mustache, which he continually pulled, stood before the table at which Danilo and his four frivolous beauties were making the night merry.

"Excuse me, Prince, but I have a message."

The prince straightened up and frowned on the intruder. It was Nish the pestilent, Nish the frightful, Nish the fool. The villainous little messenger had come from that other world which the prince hated, and hoped he had escaped from—the world of wearying duty and monotonous diplomatic routine. He turned from the frowzy apparition to a pair of audacious black eyes flashing over a brimming glass of sparkling champagne.

"Go away, Nish," he motioned. "Don't you see I am busy?"

Nish stared with his beady eyes. The lively scene reminded him of the little inn at Pech where he had lately presided, only that the dull gayety of his hostelry was as a spluttering candle-light by which this brilliance would be measured by the thousand fold. He could not help envying the man he was sent to scold.

"I see," he replied, "that you have a detaining collar 'round your neck"—it was Frou-frou's arm—"and that you are tangled up with

pressing duties, but I must tell you what his Excellency told me to say."

"It doesn't matter, Nish. I'm here in merry old Maxim's and I'm going to stay here. I like to hear the girls laugh and the corks pop and the fiddles play, and you can tell Old Diplomacy to go and be hanged."

"I must deliver my message, Prince."

"Do-do," said the prince, "if it wouldn't disarrange his mustache, you might put a collar around his neck, and enter into a pressing engagement with him."

At the word the girl jumped up and started for the little messenger, who backed quickly towards the door.

"Prince," he shouted, "His Excellency tells me to say to you that your country calls for you."

The prince staggered to his feet. White arms, loath to let him go, caught him by the coat, by the collar, by the sleeve and by the hand. Their owners did not mean to let him obey his country's call. He yielded to their seductive embrace.

"Give my country my regards and tell it to go to the devil," he cried.

"But the widow—Madame Sadoya," protested Nish.

"Perdition take her, too."

"But her twenty millions."

"They may help her on the way. I am not interested in them."

"But your country is. Listen to this dispatch."

He took from his pocket a crumpled piece of paper and read:

"If Madame Sadoya's twenty millions are allowed to leave Marsovia, we are a bankrupt nation."

The prince wrenched himself free from the detaining arms and assumed an attitude. He threw back his black coat, he swelled forward in his white vest, his form stretched up to its height, his arm swung a half circle.

"You see these girls, Nish,—these beauties? And this champagne? And these lights? And you hear this music? This is Maxim's. I'm wedded to Maxim's. You can't get me away

from Maxim's. Now go home, Nish, and say to your master that I won't marry the widow for her money, and I won't marry her for my country, and I won't marry her anyway."

In his wine-kindled enthusiasm he had clutched the arm of the nearest girl. His long fingers sank into the soft flesh and fired him to a still greater volume of passion. In his other hand he grasped a champagne flask. Nish, fearing the excited man meant to throw the bottle at his head, gradually worked his shaking form through the door until little more than his long, red mustache remained visible. But he was diplomatic to the last. He drew from his pocket a paper and pad.

"Excuse me, Prince. What is the name of the lady with the black hair and the superb figure?"

"Lo-lo."

Nish wrote it down.

"And what is the name of the dizzy—I mean the lady with the golden hair and the superb figure?"

"Clo-co."

By Permission of Henry W. Savage.

THE PRINCE AND THE MAXIM GIRLS.

"Maxim's is the place for me. I shall drink and dance with the girls."

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"Clo-co. I wonder if that is a real name or a *pomme-de-terre.* And the one with the hair parted in the middle and the superb figure?"

"Do-do."

"Do-do. I thought they were extinct. And the one—"

But Frou-frou interrupted him here. Thinking he might be a police agent she called out, "What are you doing, you horrid little wretch?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Nish, "only adding up figures."

Frou-frou had slipped off her shoe and was aiming it at the red head in the doorway. The prince laid a restraining hand on her white arm.

"I am going to stay right here," he roared, shaking his fist at the retreating head and suspecting the messenger's notes to be a report to Popoff and a plot to entangle him again in the dusty web of duty. "Maxim's is the place for me. I shall drink and dance with the girls. I am done with my duty, and done with my country, and most of all am I done with the rich

widow. They may all go to the dogs for what I care. Now, vanish, you imp of evil."

The squat little figure disappeared, and the prince sank back to the women and the wine.

CHAPTER X

The Reception at the Embassy

The Marsovian Legation at Paris was located on the Rue St. Michel, in plain view of the Luxembourg Gardens. Secretary Dusan had spared no expense in its furnishing, as it now seemed to him practically certain that the government loan would amount to a gift. The prince, as soon as he came in possession of them, would turn the widow's millions over to the service of his country.

Khadja and Nova Kovich had secured family apartments adjoining those of their chief. Nish, as messenger, and his wife, were quartered with the ambassador, and the prince had a suite in the same spacious mansion. Thus the members of the embassy were housed almost under one roof and in the finest part of the city.

The first act of the noble ambassador and his hospitable wife was to hold a reception. To be

sure there was no one to be received, as they were yet total strangers in the city, but in Paris lack of acquaintance is no insurmountable objection. The Social Bureau will furnish not only your supper, but also your guests. It will further arrange to publish the event in the leading journals, and the stranger who is lavish with his money finds an immediate *entrée* into the social set—at least, into a certain kind.

Having as yet no friends in Paris, the ambassador, who wished to cut as large a figure as possible in French eyes, resorted to the Social Bureau and had his house supplied with regulation guests—human *articles de Paris*. They were certainly a fine set to see—correct in speech, ideal in form, perfect in manners and ultra fashionable in dress. Natalie felt quite awed at their splendor, and a little ashamed of the Marsovian make-up, which appeared so inferior from every point of view. If only the prince and the widow were there, the contrast between the representatives of the two countries would not be so great. Danilo had the air of a prince, and Sonia wore robes designed by Worth

to show every grade of the passing grief of a widow. But blandishments of Popoff and Natalie had failed to bring the former lovers together.

Either by coincidence or design, Danilo and Sonia were stopping at the same grand hostlery. Danilo would have denied that he had gone to the Richelieu because he had seen in the *Social Register* that Sonia was there, but, whatever the reason for his choice, luck or love willed to have their names appear on opposite pages of the hotel register. He did not want to meet her, he said to himself—not in the parlor, not in the dining-room, not in the corridors—not anywhere, and he scanned nervously every female figure that came within his ken.

The ambassador and his wife were unaware that Danilo and Sonia had been lovers. Their instructions from Secretary Dusan were to bring together the prince and the widow. They were, therefore, very much surprised when each refused to attend the reception because the other would be there. The one gave as his first reason that he was tired with his journey and the other

that she was dressed in mourning. But, when pressed, Danilo wrote:

"You say there is to be a wealthy widow at your party. It is precisely because I do not wish to meet this widow that I do not come. She is obnoxious to me."

Sonia's note ran:

"I do not care to meet the hateful prince you talk about. If he were not to be there, I should be delighted to come."

Natalie was both astonished and pained. It looked to the ambassador and his wife as if their first diplomatic game would be lost.

But the reception went merrily on with its made-to-order guests. Three of these were more important than the rest. Jollidon was like his name—jolly, witty, lively. Add to these qualities a bewitching mustache, a seductive eye and a flattering tongue, and his charm for women will be understood.

Cascada and St. Brioche were also the choicest specimens of the class known as men-about-town whom the manager of the Social Bureau could find. The first called himself a marquis

and the second claimed to be an artist. Like Jollidon, they had faces very white, lips very red and mustaches very waxed and pointed. The simple Marsovian women, unused to French ways, were completely captivated by the gallantry and flattery of the old beaux.

All the guests were loud in their praises of their amiable and beautiful hostess. And, truly, she had a face quite uncommon for its classic purity. Light of complexion, it possessed, when not in blush under the fire of compliments from her guests, a clear and healthy pallor rarely met with among blonde women. Her pure and noble countenance contrasted sharply with the *blasé* faces of the stereotyped ladies which the Social Bureau had furnished for the reception.

Her guests called her the Baroness Popoff, and flattered her and her country until she felt ashamed because there was no man in the embassy to respond to their fulsome speeches. Her husband possessed the power of argument and the grace of dignity, but he lacked the charm of oratory and in conversation often showed himself heavy where he ought to be light. Natalie

turned her appealing eyes upon him, but only to see him, in his pompous way, absorbed in explaining some abstruse matter of state to the French women who were painfully endeavoring to hide an expression of boredom. More than ever did she long for the presence of Danilo. He would be so vivacious, so full of spirit and story, so different from her heavy husband! It was a pity that she had to lose both the prince and the widow, and each because of the other. She determined to send for them again. The Richelieu was not far away. She went to the telephone and called up the hotel office:

"Send to the room of Prince Danilo and tell him the widow is not here. Send to the room of Madame Sadoya and tell her the prince is not here."

The hotel servant delivered the messages correctly, except that he omitted the negative. The prince understood that the widow was there and wanted to see him. The widow interpreted the message to mean that the prince was there and had sent for her. Each made immediate preparations to go.

At the reception, the widow formed a lively topic of conversation.

"Is she coming here to-night—this charming woman?" inquired Cascada, who had overheard the message.

"I hope so," replied the hostess; "she is now the queen of our diplomatic chess-board."

"And the end of the game," replied her witty guest. "I hope she will find her mate."

"Her mate has already been found. His name is Danilo Petrovic and he is the noble prince attached to our Legation. Many of us believe he will become the ruler of Marsovia. It is decreed that this woman shall marry him."

"Decreed, but are they agreed?"

"They must agree."

"What if she should, in spite of you, marry a Frenchman?" Cascada rather wickedly suggested, for the politeness of Paris is after all only skin-deep. It affects the manners more than it regards the feelings.

"She must not," declared the hostess. "I forbid every one of you to make love to her."

"It will be difficult to stop us, or rather it will

be hard for us to prevent ourselves from doing so, if she is as rich and beautiful as I hear she is," replied the wily Frenchman.

Natalie, a trifle vexed, moved away, and Khadja took her place.

"Tell me about this rich widow," entreated Cascada.

"She has twenty millions," replied Khadja with little wit.

"Twenty?"

"Millions. The daughter of a poor Marsovian farmer, she married an animated money-bag, who left her a smiling widow a week later. There are still noble men in Marsovia."

"And now she is in Paris?"

"But her millions are in the bank of Marsovia."

"Is she thinking of marrying a Parisian?"

"Our host hopes not."

"And pray what business is it of his?"

"It is everything. As Marsovia's ambassador he has received orders from his royal master that the widow's millions must remain at

home. Our country has very little money."

"It has more than I have."

"And to marry the charming widow to a Marsovian has become a question of diplomacy," Khadja explained.

"Curse diplomacy," muttered Cascada under his breath.

At that moment, the doorkeeper politely announced a guest—two in fact.

"Madame Sadoya of Marsovia."

"Prince Danilo, also of Marsovia."

Everyone looked around.

Half smiling, half frowning, the lovely widow advanced into the room and directly behind her came the noble prince.

CHAPTER XI

Flies about the Honey Pot

The two carriages, containing the prince and the widow, leaving the hotel almost together, reached their destination at the same moment. The one-time lovers met on the door-step of the ambassador's house. Each looked at the other in surprise.

"Is it you?" inquired the prince.

"Oh, it is you!" exclaimed the widow.

"I thought you were already here."

"And I thought you were here."

"You sent for me."

"I did not."

"I thought you did, else I would not have come."

"And I thought you sent for me else I would not have come."

"I shall return."

"No, it is I who shall return."

Meanwhile the attendant had opened the door and was looking at them in astonishment. To save a scene the prince decided to enter, and Sonia deemed it best to do the same.

Among the guests, conversation for a moment ceased and then a low buzz ran around the room.

"Madame Sadoya!"

"The merry widow!"

"Twenty millions!"

They were the exclamations respectively of Jollidon, Cascada and St. Brioche. The introductions to the widow hardly got further than these three men, for, crowding around her, they would not give place to others. These ordinarily cut-and-dried guests, polite to the finest point, on this occasion broke all rules of decorum in their eagerness to make a favorable impression upon the woman whose smile of approval might mean the winning of a large fortune. Each believed himself just the man to handle her coveted millions, and each strove to outdo the others in flattering address.

"Gentlemen, I pray you, stand back a little," pleaded the hostess. "There are other men I wish to present to Madame Sadoya."

"We cannot tear ourselves away," declared Jollidon.

"We have never met any one so charming," asserted Cascada.

"We are dazzled by her beauty," affirmed St. Brioche.

Natalie began to be a little jealous of the flattery showered upon her fair guest. In sending for Sonia she had overshot the mark. The bees which had buzzed about the handsome hostess were now leaving her for this more attractive flower.

The young widow herself was quite confused by the attentions she received. She believed the compliments were largely insincere, but she was pleased with them because the prince was there to hear them. The praise she received would vex him because of the prize he had lost.

The flatterers continued their alluring speech and grew bolder. Although their brilliant star had only this night swum into their ken, they

were ready to worship it even to offers of matrimony. Each, jealous of the others and emboldened by the words of his rivals, went further and further.

"You really must excuse me; your attentions are quite confusing," Sonia said at length. "We do not do it this way in Marsovia. When one wishes to marry a woman there, he does not call her 'a pearl' or ask to kiss her hand, but he says, 'My father has a cow and your father has a pig. Let us get married.' I I have not been in Paris very long, and I am not acquainted with your ways. It is wrong for me to permit you to talk to me in this way. Do all the men in your city want to marry all the women?"

"No, only one."

"There is but one?"

"We all want to marry that one."

"Fie, gentlemen, how can you talk so? Won't you all please go away from me now?"

"Dear Madame," said Jollidon, "how can you be so cruel? We have been counting the moments till your arrival."

"I know; it was like counting money. People are counting me now as so much money. You must forgive me for speaking plainly, but I was brought up in the country where they always call a spade a spade. Now, gentlemen, I know what it is you are in love with—it is not my face, but my fortune."

"I would take you if you were as poor as a church mouse."

"I would take you without your twenty millions."

"I would take you if you were twenty millions in debt."

As her three ardent admirers cast their hopeful hooks, baited with flattery, before her, Sonia entered into the humor of the situation. Her eyes twinkled merrily as she said:

"Well, Messieurs, write your names plainly on your cards and present them to me. I like to catalogue the names of people who propose to me, and I believe you all have proposed."

At this moment the hostess broke in upon them. Natalie and her husband and the prince —especially the prince—were in no pleasant

frame of mind. They were thoroughly sick of the guests supplied by the Social Bureau. Their wooing of the widow was hateful to the prince, and the courting of her millions alarming to the ambassador and his wife.

"There is one man in particular I want you to meet to-night—" began Natalie, but Sonia interrupted.

"I know—it is the prince. But I came here not to meet him—that is, I came because I thought he was not here."

"But you will meet him, dear, will you not?"

"Has he requested to meet me?"

"No, but—"

"Then I will not meet him."

"Well, then, not to-night, but soon, I hope. I want you to leave your hotel and stop with us."

"Thank you. I shall leave the hotel, but not to stop with you."

"Where, then, will you go?"

"I am going home."

"Home?"

"Yes, back to Marsovia. I am tired of a place where men propose to you the first time

they see you, and every one knows what it is for. I am sighing for my own country where the manners are more simple, and where people love you for what you are, and not for the money you have."

Natalie went over to the prince and informed him of Sonia's decision to return to Marsovia. He was not averse to having her removed from the influence of these Frenchmen who wanted to make a mercenary marriage, but he said earnestly:

"Ask her for the papers. We must have the documents which her husband signed. The government loan cannot be effected until we get them. Do ask her."

"Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I cannot."

"And why not, pray?"

The prince twitched his mustache and looked foolish.

"I believe you two are old lovers and have had a quarrel," Natalie said suspiciously. "Is not that so?"

"Somewhat so."

"Pray make it up."

"We cannot."

"What was the cause of the quarrel?"

"We were engaged to be married and the day was set. The government interfered and broke off the match. She will not forgive me because I did not come to marry her, and I will not forgive her because she took a man in my place and was married on the spot."

"But you will meet her?"

"I prefer not to. But I must have the documents her husband signed. Please ask her where they are." Natalie consulted a moment with the widow, and then returned to the prince.

"She says they are deposited with the banker, Rudolf Vapin."

"With the banker! Then I am off to-morrow."

"Back to Marsovia?"

"Yes, to Rovitz—to the bank. I shall take the nine o'clock express."

Sonia was not too much engrossed with her flatterers to overhear the remark. She ever kept one ear on the prince. At the moment she

was saying to the irrepressible three, who were expostulating with her upon her decision to leave France:

"No, gentlemen, I am going home to my pigs and my cows. I love them and I do not love Paris. It is of no use for you to try to dissuade me. I mean to take the nine o'clock express."

"Permit me to say farewell at the railroad station," said Jollidon.

"It will give me delight to escort you to your train in my carriage," offered St. Brioche.

"I shall esteem it the greatest favor if I may go with you on the cars," entreated Cascada. "I shall be glad to go all the way to Marsovia."

"Now, gentlemen, you shall not meet me at the station, and you shall not escort me in a carriage, and you shall not go with me on the train. Why, don't you see I am leaving Paris to escape you?"

"Which one of us?"

"All of you. Now if there were but one—"

A roguish look crept into her eyes. The rejected suitors took courage. But she said it

to plague the prince who had turned an ear in her direction.

At the dance and supper which followed, the ambassador and his wife failed to bring the estranged lovers together. He talked or danced with all the other women and she with all the other men, but the two always kept apart. After the prince and the widow had departed, Jollidon said to his companions:

"Did you notice that they came and went almost together?"

"And they will be together on the train tomorrow," St. Brioche observed.

"And I expect they will come back together—and married," Cascada groaned.

CHAPTER XII

The Duel for the Ducats

Sonia's determination to return home was hastened by what she overheard the prince say about the papers. She did not understand the purport of the documents, but only that they were important to the government. The prince was very anxious to obtain them. Hence, if she got possession of them first—and she believed them to be her rightful property—her former lover, now her enemy, must sue her for the favor. This was a trump card and well worth the playing.

The station clock that marked a quarter to nine the next morning saw her alighting from her carriage. The minute hand was pointing to the same figure when the carriage of the prince drove up. The two vehicles had followed each other as closely as the evening previous. When they purchased tickets, the home-

bound travelers were within hand-touch of each other, but both looked straight ahead.

A train compartment, if occupied by only two passengers, is a most favorable place for a *tête-à-tête*. There is no fear of intrusion, except from the guard and that only at a station; the roar of the train is so loud that heads must be kept close together in order to hear what is being said; and the time is generally long enough for the most elaborate proposal. Danilo and Sonia could have found no better place or time to settle their differences. But, strange to say, he turned towards the head of the train and she towards the rear.

The day passed wearily to both. Late in the afternoon they were transferred to a steamboat, for the locomotive has not yet broken into the mountain-locked land of Marsovia. Here again they could have found a cosy corner had they desired, but when he saw her climb to the upper deck, he remained below.

The scenery was romantic. On all sides mountains sat grim and gray, their granite feet buried deep in the green sea. The boat glided

so close to the land that the animals and birds could be plainly seen. High up on an overhanging rock a couple of chamois, their slender necks crossed, appeared to be courting; in the depths of the dark forest joyous birds sang of love; and out on the placid lake two ducks were swimming away as happy as if on a wedding tour. Only the human lovers were taciturn and unhappy.

At the steamboat landing there still remained a half hour's ride to Rovitz. This had to be accomplished in a crazy old stage. At last it seemed as if the intractable pair must come into close quarters, but the prince saw an empty seat by the side of the driver and climbed up on the outside. The stage went only to the inn. As it was past the hour for the bank to close, Danilo decided to go to the house of its president. He gave the order to the driver just as Sonia appeared.

"Let the lady have the carriage," he said. "She desires to go to the same place."

"There is room for both," suggested the

driver, who saw no reason why he should not have two fares.

"No, I prefer to walk," the prince declared.

"Thank you," Sonia said sweetly, but Danilo was uncertain whether the gratitude was for his surrender of the carriage or for her privilege of occupying it alone.

A few steps from the inn he saw a baker's cart, and, jumping in, he offered to pay the boy well if he could pass the carriage. The horse was an old jade, but then the one attached to the carryall was almost superannuated, too, and the boy had a fair chance to earn the money. It was like a race between a crab and a tortoise, but the driver of the dilapidated coach, not knowing it was a strife between the passengers who should reach the destination first, permitted the prince to pass. He was just ringing the door-bell of the banker's house when the widow opened the gate.

When Rudolf Vapin perceived that his two visitors had come separately, he ushered the lady into the parlor and the man into the library. The rooms were separated by por-

tières and conversation in the one could easily be heard in the other. The prince excused himself for being so ungallant as to request to receive attention first.

"I want the papers," he said in a low tone, but not so low that Sonia's alert ear did not hear, "—the documents, you know which Sadoya signed and which were entrusted to you for safe keeping."

Sonia walked swiftly across the room, parted the heavy curtains and confronted the two men. "I beg your pardon, but *I* want those papers. As the widow of Sixtus Sadoya, I demand my property."

"But, madame, the papers belong to the government," the prince said, rising and bowing stiffly.

"But the money belongs to me," she replied with spirit. "If those papers turn my money over to the use of the government, I object."

Her long journey had given her time to think and she had rightly guessed the import of the documents which the prince was so anxious to obtain.

"In the name of my country, I demand those papers," cried Danilo.

"In the name of justice, I require that you give them to me," exclaimed Sonia.

The banker looked in doubt from one to the other. He reflected that, if he turned these papers over to the prince, the last link in the negotiations for the loan would be complete, and the government would immediately require the money. It would demand what his empty vaults could not furnish. On the other hand, if he gave the documents to the widow, there would be no call for the bank funds. She had just expressed the determination to defeat the loan. One can always find a lawful reason for a selfish one. He turned to the prince.

"If it were a question of gallantry to a most estimable lady, or duty to one's glorious country, it might be hard to decide, but it is not a choice between courtesy and patriotism. It is simply a question of right. You know, my dear prince, the seal of the bank was not affixed when our friend Sadoya died, and therefore I must decide that the documents belong to this

lady, who is his widow and only legatee. Of course, you can appeal to the courts."

The banker smiled grimly. He knew that a resort to the law would mean a long delay.

The prince, much crestfallen, took his departure. The precious documents were within his easy reach, yet he would not take them. He had but to ask, and this willing woman would have bundled every scrap of paper into his eager hand, and that Danilo knew right well, but his pride would not permit him to request the favor. She had come all the way from Paris to defeat him, to humilitate him, he chafed, and she had defeated him, but she should not humilitate him. He would never ask her for the papers.

He stopped to make a purchase at a tobacco-store, and when again on his journey, riding in the direction of Pech, he saw two mounted figures before him. They were Sonia and an hired attendant.

"How foolish!" he sighed, "when I am going all the way and could have been her escort."

He clattered along after them, keeping at a good distance, until they came to the gypsy

camp. The roving tribe had gone, but another had taken its place. The tinsel-adorned queen was just as old and weird and the god-daughter just as pretty and picturesque. Sonia had stopped to have her fortune told, and her horse with that of her escort completely blocked the narrow road. She made no effort to clear the way for him. Perhaps she wanted him to hear what the fates had prepared for her. It was a husband, of course, young, rich and handsome.

"French?"

"French."

"Stout or slender?"

"He will be stout."

The prince was slender.

"Dark or light?"

"He will be dark."

The prince was light.

It was the easiest fortune the skilled palmist had told, but the shrewd, old gypsy-mother read it in the questioning eyes, and not in the little, white hand, of the woman who sat like a young queen on her restive horse.

"It is Cascada," Sonia said, "I think he is real nice."

Having given Danilo the benefit of this information, she dashed merrily on.

"Cascada!" groaned the prince. "One of those accursed Frenchmen, I suppose. He will marry the pretty little flirt and get her money."

At the cross-road, he saw Sonia and her attendant turn towards Pech. It was past sundown and the night was falling fast, but he did not yield to the impulse to follow them and stop at the inn.

"What is the use?" he muttered. "It is all over between us, unless she asks my forgiveness, and she will never do that. I see it in the flash of her eye and in the toss of her head and in the saucy little fling she gives her foot in the stirrup. She's as wilful as a—as a—damned provoking little widow!"

It was late when he reached his uncle's house in Castelo and so he did not relate his errand until the next day. The three master politicians were anxious to learn what progress he had made in wooing the widow. They could hardly

believe their ears when he reported that he had come all the way from Paris with her, and the two had not exchanged a word except in the controversy at the bank.

"And you have not even obtained the documents?"

Secretary Dusan's lifted eyebrows meant not only great astonishment but also severe rebuke.

"No, I could not ask for them when she was so set on securing them herself. I could not endure her refusal."

The wise old men laughed cynically. "She would not have refused," said Danilo's uncle. "Don't you see that she wanted to get them just to make you ask for them? You do not understand women."

"She is so cursedly proud," fired up the prince.

"And naturally so," replied his uncle. "Remember that she is the possessor of a vast fortune. She is the richest woman in Marsovia. Why do you persist in treating her as if she were still a poor peasant? You can well afford to bow a little for the sake of obtaining

so much money. It's twenty millions, my boy!"

"Twenty million curses on her money!" exclaimed the prince.

"Come, boy, do not be a fool. If you can afford to despise the money for yourself, you cannot do so for the sake of your country. The claims of patriotism should appeal to you. Marsovia sorely needs this woman's fortune. Without it our embassy must be recalled, and we shall be greatly embarrassed and humiliated. We entreat you, we command you to humble your pride for the sake of your country."

And the three men who had once exerted all the powers of logic and persuasion to prevent the marriage of Danilo Petrovic and Sonia Danvic now worked with indefatigable zeal to bring about a union between the estranged lovers.

CHAPTER XIII

The Banker's Respite

Sonia had felt that she was being spoiled in Paris. She longed for the society of the simple people who loved her rather than her money, and she determined to go back to her old life in the mountain hamlet. She could lighten the burden of her parents and do a great deal of good with the fortune that had come to her so suddenly. But her reception in Pech was not exactly what she expected. The people were indeed respectful, even worshipful, but they held her afar off. She was a goddess, too good for the vulgar village clay.

"You're not one of us any more," said the old crone, surveying with disapprobation her white slippers and her Paris hat. "You've too much style and too fine manners for us plain people. You've grown away out of our reach

and you never can be Farmer Danvic's girl any more. You're Madame Sadoya of Paris."

"No, no, Godmother Refan; call me Sonia;—I'm just plain Sonia."

But the old woman shook her head. "When fowls get fine feathers they fly up on high. Why, there isn't a bed in the town fit for you to sleep in."

Sonia put off her rich robes, donned a coarse dress, and, jumping into the ox-cart, essayed to go to the fields, but her father gently, though firmly, lifted her down.

"What are you thinking of, lady? Do you want to have the folks say Rige Danvic forced his rich daughter to go to work on the farm? They know how I hate fuss and feathers, and they'll say I'm taking you down a bit. No, lady; go into the house, the potato-field is not for such as you."

"But, father, don't call me lady—call me Sonia, call me daughter, call me child. Don't treat me as if I were some great person; I'm still your little girl."

"No, lady; the water that's started down hill

won't run back. You're Madame Sadoya and you can't be a little girl any more."

"Well, father, if I can't be your little girl, then let me be your rich friend. I'll pull down your miserable hut and build you a fine house. I'll make you comfortable in your old age. You needn't do another stroke of work. Why break your back in the field when I have heaps of money?"

The plain old farmer smiled grimly. "Rige Danvic playing the gentleman! How the whole town would laugh! No, though his daughter is a lady, her father *won't* be a gentleman. I'm going to live in my little hut, and I'm going to work on my little farm, and when I die I hope they'll bury me in the little lot over yonder. That's all Rige Danvic wants."

The result was not much more satisfactory when she sought intimacy with her former companions, Hilda and Gretchen. They received gladly enough the gifts she brought them from Paris, but they looked affrighted when she proposed to romp with them in the fields or dance

with them at the inn. She was too much of a lady, they objected. As for the inn, she was minded to go there and offer herself to serve wine, but strange faces stared at her from the door where formerly had looked out the good-natured Nish and his friendly wife.

"I will go back to Paris," she said to herself when she found that her old life would not come back to her. "I would prefer to stay here in my native town, and I would build a church and a library and better homes, and I would try to make the people happy, but they are all afraid of me. It seems selfish to go back to Paris and plunge into its pleasures, but there is no help for it."

One evening Herdi Vapin called. The young villain had an idea. He had been Sonia's lover before she met the prince. Why could he not be her lover again? He knew indeed that her supposed millions were lost, but if he could marry her, it would prevent the exposure of the bank robbery and save him from prison.

Sonia received him very coldly, affecting not to see the guilty hand he offered.

"You are looking rather high, Sonia Dan—ahem!—Sadoya," he said insolently.

"You are right; I need to look low to see one like you."

"You are putting on airs, I see."

The sneer grew on his sinister face.

"Herdi Vapin, do you add insult to injury? How dare you come to see me—you who sent that note to Prince Danilo and tried to blacken my character?"

"It was because I wanted you myself. You don't blame me for that."

"You—wanted—me!"

It was as if she compressed the scorn of a thousand words into three. He started up angrily.

"Yes, and you wanted me before you met that high-stepper you call a prince. I was going to propose to you that very night I sent the note to him. I love you and I offer myself to you."

He attempted to take her hand, but she drew back.

"You need a financier to handle your money," he continued with a smile of irony, knowing

there was no money to handle. "The prince will make your millions fly like feathers, if, indeed, he does not turn every sou of them over to the government. Much good will they do you!"

"And you think you could take good care of my money?"

"Splendid! I'm in the bank, you know." He could not look her in the eye. He remembered how he had told her that he had robbed the bank.

"And you want to marry me?"

"I do; I will make you a good husband."

She drew herself up to her full height.

"Herdi Vapin, I will never marry a man who would be so vile as to blacken the character of a poor girl. Go away from me and never insult me again by a proposal of marriage."

His face darkened with rage.

"But you will marry me, my proud peacock. I possess the means to compel you to marry me."

She left the room and called her father, but Herdi did not wait to meet the farmer.

Sonia was now fully determined to leave the

hamlet. Her situation, already unpleasant, was rendered more so by young Vapin's threat, whatever it might mean. And, leaving Pech, she would take her money with her. It would be as safe in Paris and more convenient. She owed no love to the Vapins, father or son. The one had tried to separate her from the prince by bribery and the other by more dastardly means. Why should she entrust her money to the hands of her enemies?

The next day after Herdi's proposal she called for her horse and announced her intention of going to Rovitz. The men of Pech consulted. It was not safe for a lady to ride alone over the lonely road, and so, after much discussion, the old burgomaster was put forward as the most fitting escort the hamlet could furnish. Sonia graciously accepted his services and the young woman and the old man set forth.

Sonia had little conception of the real nature of her errand. That the officers of the bank would surrender almost its total funds at a moment's notice, that she could carry the entire

amount easily and safely on the back of her horse, that her father's plain hut with its lockless doors would be a proper depository for the enormous sum, until she was ready for Paris—these were errors that found a natural place in a mind that knew as little about money as it did about Mars.

She did know from the thief's own lips that Herdi had abstracted a large sum from the bank, but she was not aware that the stolen funds were practically the entire capital of the institution or that her own deposits were in any way affected by the robbery.

Sonia did not tell the burgomaster her errand, and the old man waited at the door of the building while she went inside. So little had she considered the forms of business or the bulk of money that she had no idea but that she could run with her millions from the bank as easily as with a muff from the store. She knocked at the door of the bank president. Rudolf Vapin chanced to be out and in his place sat Herdi. The young man appeared to be examining something which he hurriedly

placed in a tin box. He wore a flushed and guilty look. Sonia felt sure he was plotting some evil against her.

"Ha, I am glad to see you, Madame Sadoya," he said, rising and bowing politely. At the same time he took care to place the box away on a shelf. "You have come to say that you have changed your mind and will marry me."

"I have come to see your father," she answered coldly.

"He is in the bank."

"Will you please call him?"

Herdi stepped into the adjoining room. Left alone, her gaze wandered to the tin box. Why did Herdi start in such a suspicious way when discovered with it, and why take pains to remove it from the table? She could not rid herself of the impression that it was connected with an evil design. She stole a glance through the half-open door and then quickly took down the box and with nervous fingers removed the cover. A pistol lay within. There was nothing remarkable about that, for nearly every man in Marsovia carried a weapon, and

many women as well. Sonia had her own ready gun in the bag that hung on her arm. But the deadly missile had a name engraven on its handle. Sonia read: *Danilo Petrovic.* The prince's pistol! How did Herdi come by it? The two men were no friends. She was convinced that young Vapin held it for no good purpose. There were ugly rumors about the melée in the vault when her husband was found dead. If this was a part of the villain's plot, she would frustrate it. With trembling hand she exchanged the two weapons, slipping her own into the box and that of the prince into her bag. She replaced the box just as the Vapins appeared, the father coming into the room and the son hanging about the door as if curious to know her business.

"I have come for my money," she said bluntly, after the banker had inquired how he could serve her. "I have decided to remove it from your bank and take it to Paris."

Rudolf Vapin turned pale. He was so dumbfounded for a moment that he could not speak.

"So suddenly!" he faltered at last.

"Yes, why not?"

"Do you know that it will ruin the bank of Marsovia?"

"I had not thought of that."

"And it will be safer with us than in Paris."

Sonia hesitated. The speech on her tongue would cut like a knife, but it was just.

"I think it will be safer in Paris as long as the vaults of this bank are in charge of a thief."

Father and son turned deathly pale. Herdi closed the door and went out. The banker did not resent the accusation. He threw himself upon the mercy of his fair patron.

"I beg of you to spare us," he said pitifully.

"Not to expose your son?"

"And also not to take the money."

"I will not tell on Herdi as long as he behaves himself, but I intend to remove my money."

The banker's mind caught at a floating straw.

"Have the legal papers all been administered and the estate turned over to you?" he inquired eagerly.

"They will all be settled next week, my lawyer informs me."

"Very well, then I have a week in which to surrender the funds."

He was greatly relieved even by this brief respite. Who could tell what might happen in a week?

"And in a week I shall require them of you," she said, rising to depart.

Outside, she saw Herdi talking with the burgomaster. He was saying something wicked she knew by the evil expression on his face and the distressed look the old man wore. Young Vapin, turning at her approach, came close to her and said in a low tone:

"About this money—you had better let me come over and see you and talk it over with you."

"You will have a long way to come and see me for I start for Paris to-morrow," she replied, with a contemptuous curl of her lip as she leaped upon her horse.

"And I am going to Paris, too," he called after her. "You cannot escape me."

CHAPTER XIV

The Tight Fist of the Widow

Other influences besides the threat of Herdi and her lack of adjustment to the simple life of Pech aided Sonia in her decision to return to Paris. Almost every mail brought a letter from the ambassador's wife, describing the delights of the gay capital, and urging her to make her home at the embassy, or at least to remain for a long visit. She was so guileless as to see nothing but a warm friendship in these missives; she did not understand that she had become the most important piece on the government chess-board.

On the day of her departure there were two articles she packed with particular care in her traveling-bag. Both related to the prince. One was the package of papers with her late husband's signature, containing the terms of the

government loan, and the other was the pistol she abstracted from the paper box.

It was her hour of triumph: Herdi Verpin had just proposed to her in the Rovitz bank, several Frenchmen stood ready to prostrate themselves before her the moment her feet touched Paris, and the prince would be glad to make her an offer if he were not too proud. How could she be otherwise than happy when men everywhere wanted her?—or was it her millions? Whichever it was, she meant to cut her period of mourning short and make the most of her advantage. Paris had seen her in the black of a mourning widow; it should see her in the white of a merry one. And so she shook from her the dust of Pech, her native people staring after her in admiration, mingled with fear and even a horror she did not understand, but which she was soon to learn.

She had not been gone long when the prince came tearing into the village. After a week of pounding arguments on the one side and stout resistance on the other, he had consented to marry the wealthy widow—at least, he had

yielded so far as to promise to ask her for the precious papers, and, if she proved to be in a pleasant mood, to request her hand also.

When the prince made up his mind to do anything, he wanted to do it at once, and so no sooner had he bowed his stiff back to the will of his country than his horses's hoofs were pounding hard on the road, the rider determined to push the affair to a quick finish. He would court, propose and marry right on the spot.

Hence, he was not a little chagrined, on arriving at Pech, to find that his bird had flown. She had been gone two hours, but if he meant to follow her, he must wait until next day, for there was no boat connecting with the train that night. He decided to remain at the inn.

But now a disagreeable surprise awaited him. He had liked the honest people of Pech for their cordiality, simplicity, and heartiness of greeting. Now they were as cold as if they had all been frozen stiff on their lonely mountain. No one smiled at him, no one spoke to him, no one offered to hold his horse. The burgomaster

shook his head solemnly without speaking when he met him, the old crone muttered imprecations behind his back, and the landlord's face wore a decidedly sorry expression when the traveler announced his intention of remaining over night.

Only in one way could the prince account for their changed feelings toward him. They sympathized with the woman he had deserted at the marriage altar. It seemed to him that Sonia herself must have inspired this hatred, or, at least, have borne herself in a way to arouse their intense sympathies with the disappointed bride and their bitter hatred of the faithless bridegroom. And if so, what must be the depth of Sonia's own resentment of his conduct!

"She hates me," he reflected. "I shall never get either her hand or the loan."

His courage wilted a good deal under this smiting frost. It did not deter him from continuing his journey, but it caused him to consider more carefully the steps he must take to win this splendid prize for himself and his country.

For his country. Danilo detested this favor-

ite expression of the men who were urging him to the marriage. He wanted the woman for himself and not for his country. Her millions—they were quite an unnecessary and cumbrous appendage.

When he reached Paris, he went at once to the embassy. Now that he had surrendered to fate and his uncle, there was no reason why he should make his home at a hotel. He was amazed to find the house a blaze of illumination. The ambassador and his wife were holding a reception in honor of the arrival of Sonia, and the list of guests was much the same as on the former occasion. There were the flattering Jollidon, the honey-lipped Cascada and the foppish St. Brioche, casting their amorous glances on the woman he had come to wed. He cursed himself for a fool.

"She lingered a week in the do-nothing town, as if waiting for me, and we could have made up and married in half the time; now she is in Paris with these banded French flies buzzing around her and I shall be lucky if I ever get so much as her ear."

He did not know she was visiting the embassy and he would meet her every day. So attentive were the admiring Frenchmen to the wealthy widow that it seemed to the jealous lover as if they were all making offers. He even feared she might close with one of them before the reception ended. She had taken a lover easily—Sixtus Sadoya—and married him in a minute. Might she not take another with as little scruple or shift? In the cloak-room he heard the indefatigable three disputing about her.

"I am going to marry her," announced Cascada.

"So am I," echoed St. Brioche.

"You are not. I mean to marry her myself," asserted Jollidon.

"Gentlemen, you forget yourselves," cried the prince. "Remember the lady is barely four weeks a widow."

"But she was married only one week."

"And she has put off her mourning."

"And she is now in Paris."

The prince turned his back on his rivals. He felt a loathing for the men who wanted for her

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THE RECEPTION AT THE EMBASSY

He could not ask for her hand while she was in that hard mood.

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money the woman he wanted only for herself. He left the room and went straight to her. She was standing with the host and hostess, who were bidding some of the guests good night.

"May I have the pleasure of escorting you to your hotel?" he inquired.

"I have no hotel. I am stopping with my dear friends, the ambassador and his wife. But I will take leave of you as you are now going to your hotel."

"I have no hotel; I, too, am stopping here with my friends. But I will go if you desire it."

"Why should I care? It is a matter of the greatest indifference to me."

He was hurt by the words and even more by her tone.

"But perhaps *you* will desire to go, now you know that I am here," she continued in the same freezing voice.

He could not ask for her hand while she was in that hard mood, but behind him he felt the pressure of his iron-willed uncle and the terrible secretary.

"There is one thing I desire to ask you for,"

he said, drawing slightly away from the ambassador and his wife.

They, observing the movement, considerately left the room.

"What is it?" she inquired, demurely dropping her eyes.

"I want the government papers which you took from the banker."

"They are not government papers—they are my papers," she answered, disappointed and indignant.

"The government has instructed me to get them," he said sternly.

"But it cannot have them without my consent."

"And you will not consent?"

"Certainly not."

"You defy your government?"

"I defy you."

"You choose to put yourself in the attitude of a rebel!"

"I choose to keep my money, if that is what you mean."

"Very well; then I have nothing more to say to you."

"Nor I to you. Good night." At the words, Natalie came into the room and Sonia slipped out. The expression on the face of the prince told the story of his defeat.

"You have not won her?" Natalie inquired, laying her hand comfortingly on the shoulder of her crest-fallen guest.

"No."

"How did you approach her?"

"I asked her for the loan papers, which I know she has, as it were, in her very hand."

"Oh, you stupid, you should have asked for her hand itself; that is the only way you will get its holdings."

CHAPTER XV

The Persistent Suitors

The ambassador and his wife congratulated themselves because at last they had succeeded in getting the recalcitrant lovers under one roof. The first skirmish between them had been void of result, but now they were to meet daily, and under the nourishing care of the government, it seemed almost certain that the marriage on which the salvation of the country depended would be effected. There was, indeed, cause for uneasiness in regard to the three Frenchmen who were so persistent in their suits. The Paris beau has such a happy way of proposing that he is turned down the one day only to be right side up on the next. It seemed to Popoff and his wife as also to the prince, that the three French lovers were all the time saying to Sonia, by their hands, their tongues or their eyes, "I want to marry you." The genial host began a freezing

process, which produced no effect upon the ambitious three who sought a fortune through the hand of a lady. They continued to call at the embassy every day. Sonia flirted with them desperately, arousing the ambassador and his wife to the gravest alarm and exciting the prince to the verge of madness. Her scruples had gone to the winds since her visit home. Since she was not permitted to be a simple Marsovian, she determined to be a gay Parisienne.

Meanwhile, frantic messages came from Secretary Dusan. The government was bankrupt. The loan must be effected at once. The twenty millions of Madame Sodoya were just what was needed in the emergency. Danilo, regardless of his feelings, must make the proposal. There was no need to wait for a court marriage. The ceremony could take place at once.

Moved by the urgent appeals of his government, Popoff made still greater efforts to reconcile his two obstinate guests. But to all the heavy arguments of the ambassador and the ingenious arts of his politic wife, the stubborn lovers turned a deaf ear. Although under the

same roof, there seemed no opportunity for a *tête-à-tête.* At breakfast the prince or the widow was always late; during the day if one was in the other was sure to be out; at dinner they were kept apart by talkative guests; and the evening was spent separately at the concert or the theatre.

At length, the ambassador and his wife, grown desperate by the miscarriage of their plans, contrived a little plot which they believed could not fail of its purpose. It was a neat piece of matchmaking, worthy of Cupid in Paris and required the united efforts of the diplomatic chief of the legation and his artful wife, as well as the services of its two attachés and its messenger.

In the first act of the little drama, the prince goes to the Alcazar with Nova Kovich, the ambassador having considerately furnished the tickets. It is the opening night of a new *revue.* The prince's feelings having been powerfully wrought upon by the thrilling love scene, he naturally thinks about his own proposal to Sonia.

The second act touches his sensitive soul with the spur of jealousy.

"I saw St. Brioche to-day, talking with the widow."

"Indeed!"

"They were in the blue room."

"Is it possible?"

"And in a dark corner."

"The devil!"

"And I am sure he was proposing to her."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he was talking in a very low tone."

"The villain!"

"They were so absorbed in each other they did not see me, though I passed within six feet of them."

"Did you hear what he said?"

"No, but I saw her blush. I tell you, prince, this is getting serious. Perhaps, however, you do not care."

"Of course not."

But Danilo ground his teeth in rage, and under his breath made some uncomplimentary remarks about the meddling Frenchman.

The second scene is on the gay boulevard. The prince goes riding with Khadja in a carriage with a span generously paid for by Popoff. Just as they are turning into the Rue de la Paix, the third attaché tickles the ear of his superior with a vexing straw.

"It was just here, that I met the widow yesterday, in a brougham."

"In a brougham?"

"Exactly, and she was not alone."

"Well."

"That big Frenchman, Cascada, was with her."

"You don't say so, Khadja. I did not think she would go riding with *him*."

"And they were making love very fast."

"Khadja, you don't know that, and you have no right to say it."

"Yes, I do. They stopped a moment at the fountain just as I was passing."

"And you heard something?"

"I did."

"What was it?"

"It will hurt your feelings."

"What do I care?"

"Well, then, I heard him say, 'I love you,' and he took her hand. They drove on and I lost the rest, but I think by her pleased look and the color of her face that she accepted him."

"Cascada?"

"Cascada."

"Khadja, we will not take a long ride to-day. Driver, you may turn back."

"That's two of them—Cascada and St. Brioche," he muttered. "I wonder if she has accepted them both."

The third act takes place in the private room of the prince. He has just finished brushing his clothes after the ride when there is a knock at the door. Nish enters.

"His Excellency wishes to see you."

"Where?"

"In his office."

"Tell his Excellency I will be down in a moment."

Nish remained with his hand on the door-knob.

"Well, you have delivered your message; why don't you go?"

"If you please, Prince, there is a word I should like to say."

"Then come into the room, and say it."

The messenger came in, stroking his long, red mustache.

"How much better it is to be in Marsovia, where they drink wine out of good goblets, rather than in little thimbles, as they do in this city," he said, glancing at the tiny glasses on the table.

"That is not what you came in to say, Nish."

"True, Prince, yesterday I went to see the Feet of Nelly."

"You mean the Fête de Neuilly, you fool."

"Well, it might be that, your Highness. Anyhow, there was a great female wrestler."

"Who paid for your ticket?"

"His Excellency. I didn't go exactly for pleasure, you see, it was a diplomatic mission."

"A diplomatic mission!"

"Yes, I was sent to watch the widow. But

when I say watch the widow, I mean watching her millions."

"Was the widow there?"

"I regret to say she was there. But not her millions. They are in the bank of Marsovia, but I expect they will soon be in the bank of Paris."

"What brought her there?"

"You mean to ask *who* brought her there. It was Monsieur Jollidon."

"Jollidon!"

"The same. The man with the jolly little mustache and the jolly little eyes and the jolly little cane. They were in the row directly in front of me."

"They?"

"Monsieur Jollidon and soon-to-be Madame Jollidon."

"What are you talking about, Nish?"

"Didn't I hear them whispering between the acts? The little mademoiselle had just thrown the big bourgeois and the lights went down while she was getting ready for the next bout with him—"

"The widow?"

"No, the wrestler. And in the dark, I distinctly heard him kiss her."

"The wrestler?"

"No, the .widow. She and the jolly man were making it up."

"Making what up?"

"Marriage."

"Nish, you are lying to me."

"As true as I was an honest innkeeper in Pech, and now am an honest messenger in Paris, I heard him say, 'When shall we be married?"

"And what was her reply?"

"I could not hear exactly, but it sounded like 'to-morrow.' And I think it is a shame, Prince, that you should lose so good a woman."

"Thanks, Nish; you have a heart somewhere beneath your ridiculous brass buttons. No other Marsovian but you and me think of the woman, the rest think only of her money. Now bow yourself out and I will follow."

The prince made long, hard strides down to the ambassador's office. He found that official

tilted back in a chair, smoking an expensive cigar. Offering one to the prince, he rose, saying:

"It's deuced hot and stuffy here. Let us go out to the summer-house, where we can have a cool, quiet talk."

The embassy building, like all other houses in that fashionable quarter, was surrounded by a large court. A shell walk led to the summer-house at the extreme rear of the grounds. No better spot for love-making than this summer-house could be designed. It was too far from the house for inquisitive ears to overhear. It had wicker settees just large enough for two persons. Graceful vines trailed down from the low ceiling. Red and white flowers nodded out of delicate vases. Two or three fans lay suggestively around.

This was the place the ambassador had chosen for the denouement of his little plot. It was a veritable lovers' retreat. Roguish Cupid peeped all around the red-lipped roses and the little love-apples and the blushing kiss-me-nots. To hold hands, to make vows, to kiss,—all this

seemed as natural as to dance at a ball or to pray in a church.

And Sonia also had been prepared. At every opportunity, Natalie had dwelt upon the virtues of the prince. He came of the choice stock of the Petrovics. He was brave as a lion, gentle as a woman, and noble as a king. Indeed, he was to be the king of Marsovia, and Sonia would be the queen. The head of the government was called at present only a prince, but if the measure now before the Senate was approved, he would soon have the title of king. These two—Danilo and Sonia—were made for each other. They were both pure, patriotic, handsome, and once they had been almost married. What a grand king and noble queen they would make! It was a pity to fly in the face of Providence. Thus did Natalie urge and argue.

Sonia listened, but did not commit herself. When her friends praised the prince, she spoke flatteringly in turn of St. Brioche, Cascada and Jollidon. Did not her hostess think the Frenchmen were witty and graceful and gal-

lant? They were such pleasant company, and it was astonishing how much they knew about the world. It seemed as if she and her countrymen had lived in a dark hole in the mountains, while the splendid French had discovered heaven.

On the pretext of arranging for a garden party, Natalie took her guest out into the lovers' bower. She was explaining how, in case of a wedding, the tiny house could be made into an arbor for the bridal couple, when the door opened and her husband entered, followed by the prince. Danilo and Sonia had so managed that they had not met for three days. They bowed coldly to each other and looked at their host and hostess as if asking to be relieved from an embarrassing situation. At that moment, Nish, true to his instructions, poked his long, red mustache in at the door.

"Callers, your honor; callers, my lady," he announced, bowing right and left.

"For the ambassador?" inquired Natalie, pointing to her husband.

"For the ambassadress?" echoed Popoff, bowing to his wife.

"For both," replied Nish, swelling importantly.

The host and hostess excused themselves and went out, taking care to close the door behind them. The lovers were left alone.

CHAPTER XVI

The Prince's Vow

For a moment they were confused. Sonia was the first to recover herself.

"Will you sit down?" she said, making room for him on the settee. For the purpose, all the other seats had been turned to face the wall. If he accepted her invitation, he must sit very close to her.

"If you please," he replied, in a pinch between love and anger, but deciding it was in better form to accept.

"You have come to ask me again for the papers, I suppose," she began, and he was thankful she had the art to break the ice.

"I have not come to ask you for anything. Indeed, I did not know you were here. I came to talk with the ambassador."

"But the ambassador would rather you would talk with me."

"It does not matter. My personal affairs are

my own. I only obey him in matters of diplomacy."

"And diplomacy has nothing to do with me," she said artfully.

The prince winced.

"I am afraid it has a great deal to do with you, but that is not my mission. I will have nothing to do with the wretched business."

She admired him for his manly independence, so different from the obsequiousness of the smirking Frenchmen. At the same time she was a trifle piqued.

"Well, it is fortunate for you that you do not understand it, because it would be of no avail. I am going to enjoy the delights of Paris—and freedom."

"Oh, and perhaps you will marry again?"

He looked her straight in the eyes and she met his gaze, each trying to read the other.

"Very likely. Why should I not?"

"No reason, whatever, if you like. I believe in a *proper* marriage."

He was thinking of the three French lovers.

"And the marriage you were about to make

was not proper, and so you avoided it—at the last moment?" Now he had it. It was a blow full and fair.

"If it had rested with me, you would not now be the widow of Sadoya, but my wife."

"If it had rested with you! Well, let it rest. It is the old, old story, and we will forget it. Let us not be so foolish as to grieve over what might have been."

"Come, that is hardly fair—it was my old uncle."

"Let me see—I think I have heard of the old uncle. Oh, yes, he would not allow his noble young nephew to bestow his aristocratic affections on a farmer's daughter, and so the noble prince must aristocratically break his word."

"Which did not break your heart."

"No, it did not break my heart."

"It soon found consolation—very soon—remarkably soon; in one hour, I believe."

"Yes, in one hour, my plebeian heart recovered from the hurt of faithless aristocracy. You are a most noble prince."

The reflections upon his honor touched him to the quick.

"Believe me, it was not my fault."

"Nor, perhaps, *my* misfortune."

She laughed coldly, her white teeth glittering like ice.

"No—your good fortune was waiting for you—or, at any rate, your *great* fortune. You need not marry for money *next* time."

They were growing more bitter. Sonia rose.

"My reasons for marrying concern no one but myself."

"And your next husband. He will reap the benefit of those reasons."

"I had many reasons—"

"Yes—twenty millions."

"Anyhow, now I am rich—and a widow—with everything I want."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"Love?"

"I don't believe in love."

"You believed in mine, once."

"I was a little fool."

She sat down again, toying with her gold watch chain. The interview appeared to be ended, but neither seemed inclined to go.

"And you believe in the love of your French lovers. If reports are true, they were proposing to you—and you were leading them on."

"It is false."

"I am glad to hear it."

"They want my money. All men want money. I believe the uncle would no longer object to his noble young nephew bestowing his affections upon me—if it rested with him. I have heard that the noble prince has been commanded to propose to me."

It was now the prince who jumped to his feet.

"And do you think that I—"

"All men are alike."

"All other men may be, but I am not."

"When a man says to me, 'I love you,' I know he means my money."

"You may be sure of one thing—I, at any rate, will never say to you, 'I love you'."

"Of course not. You said it once, and did not mean it. Why should you repeat the falsehood?"

He was getting the worse of the sharp tongue-

fence. In his repudiation of the sordid motive, he could think of nothing but a stronger vow.

"I will never say it—I repeat it—I vow it—I swear it."

"Are you not making it rather strong? But why not say 'I love you,' if you want to?"

"I *don't* want to."

"It needn't lead to anything. *I* would take care of that."

"And so would I."

"I hope I can rely upon you. We are likely to be in the same house for several days."

"You can depend upon me. I shall not make love to you. I will leave the Frenchmen to do that."

"And they know how to do it. They capture one almost by force."

"You love them—at least, one of them. It's that fellow with the little twisted mustache that calls himself Jolly—something."

"But, Prince, you do not care. You have sworn not to love me yourself."

"I have sworn not to *say* I love you."

"Oh, that is different."

"I think we had better go," said the prince—"at least, I think *I* had better go."

"And I will go, too."

As they passed out together, Sonia said:

"I think, Prince, you had better take my arm."

"Why?"

"Because, I believe this has all been arranged and we must not disappoint our friends."

"Arranged?"

"Yes, this meeting in the summer-house. It was planned to have us make up here."

"And we haven't?"

"No, but they will expect it."

He took her arm. As they walked up the path only the cracking shells under their feet broke the silence. As they had surmised, the host and hostess were awaiting them.

"You have agreed, I see," said the ambassador, gazing with gratification upon their smiling faces as he rose to meet them.

"Yes," replied Sonia, "we have agreed *not* to be dupes and puppets; to be friends, but not lovers."

CHAPTER XVII

The Election

"Not to be lovers, you rebels,—not to be lovers, why that is what I brought you here for," fumed the ambassador.

He had spent time, money and effort on his neat plot. It was his supreme stroke of diplomacy.

"Really, they are lovers—only they don't know it," said his wife, soothingly.

"No," replied Sonia, "we shall be great friends, but not lovers, because, you see, if we are lovers, we might want to change our minds at the last moment—at least, the prince might. It is inconvenient to change your mind when you are about to be married, and so, to save any further trouble of that kind, we have decided to be only friends."

The ambassador looked puzzled. Some friends at this moment, sending in their cards to Sonia,

saved her from further embarrassment. She excused herself and went to see her visitors, who proved to be the three indefatigable fortune-hunters.

Messieurs Jollidon, Cascada and St. Brioche were each impressed with the conviction that the fates were favorable. The Marsovian government, indeed, did not smile upon their suit. The ambassador was growing stern, but the widow was smiling. Each would win were it not for the others. Each believed himself the favorite suitor, but with not much distance to spare in the triangular race. Each would have preferred to call alone on the lady whose smile or frown meant the gain or loss of a fortune, but, as they all lived at a second-rate lodging-house, no one of the ambitious lovers could call on the potent widow without the knowledge of the others, and so the three always went together. Under these conditions, there could be no *tête-à-tête,* no private proposal, no stolen kisses. It was like a courtship in public. It was embarrassing, or would have been to persons of more sensitive nature than the callous old beaux,

but it was a means of merriment to the widow.

The day was big with destiny. The crisis had come. Each man felt that his fate might be decided before the set of sun. And each desperate lover had come armed for the fray. St. Brioche's weapon was a huge bunch of Jacqueminot roses. Cascada had reinforced his saccharine qualities by several boxes of bon-bons from Marcelle's. Jollidon fortified himself with a musical selection which he was prepared to sing. When Jollidon sang his voice trickled in long drawn-out sweetness, his bosom heaved with pent-up emotion, his hand went to his bosom, his eyes looked love. On this occasion he poured into his song all his voice and all his soul. He was singing for twenty millions. It was a little ditty about two lovers. The climax came in the lines:

"The world is cold we have to wander through,
Though you're the world to me, and I to you,
You're all my world—I am the world to you."

At the conclusion he bowed low before his idol.

"Yes, Madame Sadoya, you are my world—you are all my world. Say if it is not so—say it aloud—say it in the presence of my friends. Let it be known that you are the world of Jollidon. Shall we not publish our engagement today?"

But his rivals were not so easily vanquished.

"Hold!" cried Cascada. "This is Election Day. Let us have an election here and let the women vote. There is only one woman and she has the casting ballot. I offer myself, Madame Sadoya,—I offer myself for your suffrage, your hand, your heart—"

"Don't forget my money," interrupted Sonia.

"Dear lady," put in St. Brioche, "I am a poor artist—not poor, I trust, in the knowledge of my art, but in this world's goods. I do not pretend to be rich, but I offer you an honest heart, a devoted heart, a loving heart. If you deign to accept your humble servant, it will be the chief pleasure of my life to wait upon you—to hold your parasol, to tie your shoes—"

"To do up my back hair," laughed the widow. "Now, gentlemen, I am highly flattered, but you must give me time. You never vote but once for a husband, do you? With us in Marsovia, a marriage is for life. But I hear it is not so in France. I fear I will have to study the marriage code in Paris—about property for example. Now, if I married, would my money still be mine, or must I give it to my husband?"

"All yours," said Brioche.

"I would not touch a cent of it," declared Cascada.

"If you give it to me, I'll give it right back," vowed Jollidon.

"Well, gentlemen, you are kind and very disinterested. Now I see it is not my money but me you want, and it is only a question of the one who loves me the most."

All jumped to their feet and bowed profoundly. All began at once to declare their devotion, but she raised her hand.

"One at a time if you please, and I wish to see each one alone. You first, Monsieur St. Brioche. I will beg the other gentlemen to with-

draw for a moment and I strictly give you charge, each one of you, that you must not reveal to the others what I say to you. As soon as I have spoken to you privately you must go straight home and not speak to each other until I bid you."

All solemnly promised and Cascada and Jollidon withdrew.

"If the French marriage code permits it, I will marry you at noon on Saturday," Sonia whispered to the poor artist.

St. Brioche withdrew radiantly happy and Cascada took his place. Sonia repeated the same words to him:

"If the French code permits it, I will marry you at noon on Saturday."

"You don't mean it," exclaimed the joyous Frenchman.

"Hush, not a word!"

She motioned him away and he went out smiling triumphantly upon Jollidon who entered at the same moment.

"If the French code permits it, I will marry you at noon on Saturday."

"Why,—why, my lady, we will be the jolliest pair in Paris. We—"

"No more now; go right home and say not another word until the hour."

All went silently out, too elated to keep still and yet under promise not to talk to each other. But if each one was not permitted to exult over his rivals, he was not prevented from telling his good fortune to other men. Each man in turn related the story of his successful suit to the amazed ambassador. When Popoff heard of St. Brioche's acceptance by the widow, he groaned inwardly at the loss of the twenty millions. When he learned that Cascada, too, had gained the coveted hand of the lady, he looked at the expectant bridegroom in perplexity. But when he was informed that Jollidon also had her promise, he was simply dumb-founded. He stood in the reception-room, staring into space when Sonia came out from her triple proposal after dismissing the over-joyful men.

"Sonia!"

"My Excellent Ambassador!"

"What does this mean?"

"It means that three men want to marry me."

"And you have promised yourself to all three?"

"If you please, Your Excellency."

"And at the same hour?"

"They told you, I see."

"But, Madame Sadoya—Sonia—my good woman—which one are you going to marry?"

"We shall see."

CHAPTER XVIII

An Alliance Between Foes

It was some moments before the ambassador could realize the extent of the disaster which so imminently threatened his country. The loss of the Sadoya millions meant the failure of its rulers to make Marsovia a complete independency. It must still continue to be a dependent of Servia. All its plans of common defence against Austria must be abandoned. The French embassy must be recalled. The debts which the government had incurred could not be paid. And so all the authority of his country had been exerted upon the stubborn prince to compel his marriage with Madame Sadoya. Her millions had been regarded as a sure asset. With this failure to secure them the entire colossal fabric of diplomacy must collapse.

The ambassador retired to his office and tried to collect his wits. The situation was entirely

too difficult for him. It was humiliating for so great a man to ask advice, but he was so completely prostrated by the turn of affairs that he condescended to take counsel. He determined to summon the entire embassy—the women as well as the men. Even Nish and his wife were not to be overlooked in the invitation. Every Marsovian should be interested in this crisis of his country. His very bread-and-butter was at stake.

The solemn conclave met in the blue-room of the embassy building. Every scion of the far mountains was present except Sonia. Popoff presided with great dignity. He set forth the situation in a few well-chosen words, telling his countrymen how the government loan had failed at the last moment by the death of the iron-master, and that the widow had refused to carry out the terms of the contract. Hope had thus centered on the prince, who, it was expected, would marry the widow and secure the money for the use of the embarrassed country. The young people had quarreled, or at least had failed to agree, and now the French were about

to secure the rich prize that belonged to Marsovia.

The speaker revealed the closest state secrets. It was not a time to conceal anything from the people nor to spare anybody's feelings. The situation was grave even to the verge of panic. The high and the low were alike in peril. The alarming statements of the ambassador with the background of the solemn and dignified assembly were calculated to make an effective appeal to the feelings of the patriotic young prince.

But the prince resented the imputation upon his patriotism. He was on his feet the moment his chief had taken his seat.

"Friends of Marsovia, I protest against this reflection upon my loyalty. You all know that to my shame I allowed myself in the interests of the state to be persuaded to jilt the very woman that now you are urging me to marry. Now she rightly resents any approach I may make to a suit for her hand. Furthermore, I obeyed orders as a faithful servant of the state in attempting to secure the late President Sadoya's confirmation of the government loan, thus ren-

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THE AMBASSADOR AND THE PRINCE.

"Danilo Petrovic, you are a diplomatic failure."

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dering myself more obnoxious, if possible, to the lady of the millions. I am, therefore, the last man in Marsovia to commission as her suitor. I tell you, she does not want me—"

"Have you ever told her that you love her?" interrupted the ambassador.

"Love? She does not believe in it!" cried the prince, excitedly.

"Will you put her to the test, will you say to her, 'I love you?' Swear that you will say this, and if you are not successful in your suit, we will acknowledge that you have done all that could be asked of a true son of Marsovia."

"By St. Peter of Danilobad, the patron of my race, I have sworn that those are the very words I will not say to Sonia. I will not pretend to make love to a woman who despises love—"

"Danilo Petrovic," burst in the ambassador, "you are a diplomatic failure—you are a disappointment to me. A young man whom I have trained myself for months, to whom I gave an opportunity of proving his zeal—now when the test comes, you will not dissemble for the sake of your country—"

"The country may go to the dogs!"

"You will not woo a rich woman, a beautiful woman, a charming woman—you will let her marry a Frenchman, you—"

"She may marry a dozen Frenchmen for all I care."

"You will not take her money when it is almost thrown at you, you—"

There was an awkward hush when the subject of this discussion entered the room, catching the last words.

"Prince, who has been throwing money at you?" she asked.

"No one," he answered, "but my devoted head has been busy dodging far more unpleasant objects—hard and cutting words. If you remain here, you too, will not escape."

He offered her his arm, and the prince and the widow left the room, the company with mingled feelings gazing after them.

"Bless me, I believe they are lovers after all!" exclaimed Popoff, rubbing his eyes. "If it were not that she has set the day to marry one of

those frog-eaters, I should have hope for my country still."

He dismissed the council and stood at the window looking after Danilo and Sonia who had gone into the garden. They went straight on towards the summer-house, the door of which stood open.

"Let us be frank," said Sonia. "I know what they were saying, as well as if I had been present."

"We are enemies," Danilo said, "but we can join forces against a common foe. Making a merchandise of marriage and tying you to a man you do not love just to get your money!"

"I felt sorry for you, Prince," she replied. "Tying you to a woman you do not love just to please somebody else!"

"But we won't please them!—we won't yield to them!"

"Never!"

"You will be firm?"

"I will; I can be as independent as you."

"And I can be as determined as you."

"We can sit down, I suppose," she said, look-

ing at the short settee. "Oh, I forgot you said we are enemies."

"But we are friends against the common enemy. We will sit down and talk it over."

They were not very comfortable, because, draw apart as they would, his military coat just brushed her fluffy sleeve. They tried to be very rigid. The door was left open. For either to close it, might be wrongly interpreted by the other.

"Your wedding, I suppose, will be a brilliant affair?"

He began the skirmish at this point because it was involved in thick darkness. Her friends—not even Natalie—could learn anything about the complex engagement.

"It will not. How can I ask my hostess to furnish me a wedding when she is opposed to the marriage? But," she added archly, "I thought it was *our* wedding we were to talk about—the wedding we have resolved shall never be."

"There is no use wasting breath on the impossible," he answered, with a man's blindness

to a woman's art. "I am surprised that you are going to marry a Frenchman."

"But, pray, why should you care?"

He did not answer the question; he only said, ironically:

"Rumor has it you are to marry three."

"Possibly."

She was becoming dry and hard.

"But as you cannot marry three, which is the favored one? Is it that fop of a Jollidon?"

She did not reply.

"Or Cascada, the clown?"

Silence still.

"Or that bogus saint—Breeches—or whatever you call him?"

She was a statue.

"Oh, come now, I take it all back. They are all good, clever fellows and will make you nice husbands."

"Silly boy! You are jealous."

"Jealous! *I!* Well, that is good. You shall see whether I am jealous. I mean to come and dance at your wedding."

"You shall not. But if you are present at

noon on Saturday, you shall see my choice for yourself."

"At noon on Saturday?"

"That is the time set."

"Sonia, this is very serious. It is certainly queer that you should come to Paris to pick up a husband."

"It seems to trouble you very much."

"I thought you were more patriotic. That is what hurts me."

"Oh, it is patriotism! Then, suppose I go back to Marsovia and marry Herdi Vapin, the banker's son. He offered himself the day I left home."

Danilo jumped to his feet.

"Marry what — how — where — when you choose! What do I care?"

"You need not call out so loudly. We are not announcing our engagement yet. Please be discreet."

"I am out of all patience with you," he said testily.

"You do not love me yourself," she said, looking distressed.

"Certainly not."

"Rude man."

"I might if you were poor. It's the cursed money that stands in the way."

"If I were poor you would love me! But then your uncle would not permit his noble nephew to marry me."

"Sonia, let us have done with this parleying which leads to nothing. Come, I am going. You will not see me again."

"You are going to leave the embassy?"

"I am going to leave Paris."

"And when are you coming back?"

"Never."

"But you said you would dance at my wedding."

"I was in jest. I shall not stay to see the mockery."

"Mockery!"

"Mockery—because you do not love the man you are to wed. You are marrying him for spite and he is marrying you for your money."

"Very well, if you see it so. But remember"

—very sweetly—"we shall be *at home* in Paris after we are married."

"You and your three Frenchmen." He laughed bitterly and turned to go.

"Surely, we are not going to part enemies."

He turned.

"How shall we part since we cannot part friends?"

They stood gazing into each other's eyes, he frowning, she smiling. A step sounded on the shell walk. The intruder saw only the face of the man; had he seen also the face of the woman, he would hardly have broken Cupid's arrow so rudely. Her arms, her voice, her lips, —all invited.

"How shall we part?"

She repeated his words.

"As lovers, I hope," responded a deep, bass tone.

They turned to see Popoff blandly regarding them.

"Excuse me," he apologized, "but there is a strange man in the house. He wants to see Madame Sadoya and is acting queerly. I was

about to turn him out, but he says he is from your village. I thought you might want to see him."

The prince and the widow followed the ambassador, both wondering what might have happened had the interview been prolonged. As they entered the rear door of the palace, Nish the messenger appeared, edging up towards Sonia.

"Who is it, Nish?" she inquired.

"It's your father—Rige Danvic from Pech."

"My father!"

Her heart fell for she knew his visit to Paris could bode no good.

CHAPTER XIX

The Peasant's Warning

It was a grave errand indeed that called to Paris the simple farmer who seldom left the quiet of his mountain hamlet. His countenance, always solemn, bore the marks of real distress. It was a marvel that the untraveled old man had found his way so well in a great city and among a strange people, but, by diligent inquiry for the Marsovian embassy, he had at length reached that part of the vast French metropolis where his countrymen resided.

His ring at the Popoff mansion was not immediately answered. The danger of losing the Sadoya millions had operated to produce economy in the running of that expensive establishment. Nish, whose official title was the Honorable Messenger of The Most Excellent Ambassador and whose duties had been rather

ornamental than useful had been reduced in rank and set to the performance of such lowly tasks as the running of errands and the answering of the door. On this occasion, Nish could not be found, for all the ambassador called through his tube and tinkled his little silver bell. As a matter of fact, Nish possessed diplomatic powers of his own quite unsuspected by his august chief, and he was at that moment exercising these powers in the field where the wise ambassador had failed. Telling Nova Kovich he had a matter of great importance to communicate, he summoned the inferior attachés of the embassy in that gentleman's residence and laid before them his neat little plan.

"It's a bold one, ha, ha!—it's cracking good, ha, ha!—the best one yet, ha, ha!" The little man pulled his long, red mustache and shook his fat sides in his glee over his brilliant idea.

"Well, tell us, you fool," said Khadja, "don't burst yourself trying to hold it."

Nish composed himself and stood in the center of the circle of his expectant countrymen.

"The government wants the money—wants

it bad—wants the twenty millions of Madame Sadoya."

"Every fool knows that," replied Nova Kovich.

"It only wants the woman because it needs the money—you see!"

"Well," replied his auditors, impatiently.

"If it could get the money without the woman, it would be just as well satisfied."

"Well?"

"Well, we'll get her money without her."

The others still vainly looked for light.

"The government loan—don't you see?—it was just going through—all signed—when Sadoya died. *She* won't give up the papers. *We* know where the papers are."

Then the little messenger unfolded the particulars of his great plot. Madame Nish took care of Sonia's room. There was something the rich widow kept very carefully tied up in a tin box. It was never seen but once out of her trunk and then only for a moment. What valuable contents did that box contain? Could there be any doubt? It was just the size and

shape to hold legal documents. If those valuable papers could be obtained, they could be sent to Castelo, and the government loan would go through in spite of the widow. Even if she married a Frenchman, the courts would no doubt hold that a legal transaction performed by her husband before his death must be carried out.

"Madame Nish can get those papers—she can watch her chance—trust a cat to catch a mouse—she'll get 'em and then the government 'll get 'em, and then what 'll we get?—eh?"

Nish fairly danced in anticipation of the fat plums that would fall into his outstretched hands. It might be supposed he would have been loath to communicate his knowledge to his fellow-countrymen in order to keep for himself and his sharp-witted wife the full benefit of his daring scheme. But the rogue reasoned too well for that. The plot was too large. It needed men with an influence at court and a knowledge of the ways of government in order to bring it to a successful close.

"But why not tell all this to the ambassador

and give the documents to him?" inquired Nova Kovich.

"Or to the prince?" added Khadja.

"To the ambassador—to the prince!" If Nish's countenance had been a thermometer, the mercury would have dropped to the bottom of the tube.

"Give it to Popoff! How then would it read? 'Our great and Most Excellent Ambassador, the good Popoff, by his shrewd diplomatic skill, has obtained the legal documents from Madame Sadoya,' and so and so on. No credit to Nova Kovich, to Khadja, to Nish—all to the great and mighty ambassador."

"And as to the prince—trust a man to thwart the will of a woman he is in love with! You know better than that, Nova Kovich—you do, Khadja."

But Khadja, who was a practical man, interposed an objection. "The bank seal has not been affixed."

This was, indeed, a serious obstacle. The conspirators drew their heads together in a smaller circle. It was deemed important to

get the papers into the hands of the government before the widow's marriage. In that case, perhaps there would be no marriage. But there was no time to be lost. The wedding was barely three days off. If the documents were now in hand, they might be taken to Rovitz, properly stamped and returned in time, but they were not yet secured. It was finally decided that Nish should take the first train for Marsovia, secure if possible the bank seal and return with it, while the prowling wife of the messenger should meanwhile steal the precious box.

Hardly had the details been arranged when a servant came to inform Nish that his master wanted him. Swelling with pride, the little man obeyed the summons. He would succeed where the greatest diplomats of his country had failed. He was wondering what post, as his reward, he would demand of his government, when the voice of the ambassador sounded sternly in his ears—harsher because of his increased importance during the last few minutes. Popoff, after looking in on his

strange visitor, was leaving the house in search of Sonia.

"Nish, you are a failure."

He towered so high above his little messenger that the latter would have felt very small had not his statecraft caused him to feel very big.

"But not so big a failure as some other men," he answered boldly.

"Why, Nish—why are you not so big a failure as some other men?"

"Because I am not so big a man—great man, great failure, you know." He was looking hard at the large proportions of his master.

"Surely, Nish, you are not casting any reflections upon your honorable ambassador."

"Certainly not, and I hope you are not casting any reflections upon your honorable messenger."

"Nish, you forget yourself. You are on the lowest rung of the Diplomatic Service."

"But I am rising, Your Excellency, and I expect to rise still higher. I hereby hand in my resignation as your honorable messenger, to take effect within three days."

"Nish, you are crazy. What do you expect to do?"

"I expect a higher diplomatic post. I leave Paris on the first train."

"For what purpose, Nish?"

"A diplomatic mission, Your Excellency."

"And for what or whom?"

"For my government."

As his messenger refused to reveal the nature of his mission, the ambassador, much surprised and suspicious, went on his way to the summer-house, while Nish made his way to the reception-room and met the visitor from Pech. Astonishment and pride strove in the breast of the little messenger as he beheld his old neighbor, but he had short time either to inquire the meaning of the visit of the farmer or to exhibit his own increased dignity, for rapid footsteps were heard at the door. He ran out, giving the daughter a moment's warning of the unexpected visit.

Sonia came in hurriedly and essayed to throw herself into the arms of her father, but the old man drew back.

"No, woman, I have not come to kiss you—I have come to warn you."

Woman! The word was horribly cold.

"To warn me!"

"To warn you of what all Pech is talking about and what all Paris will be talking about if you do not take care."

"Why, father, what is it?"

She turned pale, clutching his arm in her eagerness to know. He looked at her silently as if he would read her inmost soul.

"Speak, father, what is it?"

"Do you know that your husband was murdered?"

He spoke slowly, giving every syllable its proper quantity.

"Murdered!"

"Yes—murdered. I said it, did I not?"

"By whom?"

"Why, that is the worst of it."

"Tell me—by whom?"

Again he paused and spoke slowly in order to let the words tell.

"By the prince."

"It is false! I will not believe it!"

"I thought you did not know it. They say you are to marry him."

"That, too, is false."

"I am glad to hear it. You surely will not marry him now that you know it."

"But I do not know it, and I do not believe it. What reason had he for the deed?"

"Every reason, daughter. I will call you daughter now that I believe you did not know. He had every reason."

"What were they?"

"Was he not about to marry you when that man stepped in?"

She did not reply. She stood staring at the floor.

"And had he not money? One pistol shot rightly aimed would make the prince a rich man."

She started violently. A thought pierced her like a dagger. A pistol shot!

The weapon lay hid in her trunk. And *his* name was on the handle! Her father was watching her narrowly.

"They say," he continued pitilessly, "that the prince had twenty million reasons to kill him."

"Oh, God, this is terrible."

She sank down on the floor and buried her face in her hands.

"All Pech is talking about it. Strange you did not hear it when you were there."

Here, then, was the explanation of the strange coldness of her people, the stony stare, the suspicious whispers, the shrugging of the shoulders when she approached. Here was the reason she could not get near those she had loved, and, failing to find a friend, had returned to Paris. She had supposed it was because of her riches. It was because they thought she meant to marry the murderer of her husband. Some, perhaps, had even wickedly suspected she was in league with him. She remembered how soberly Herdi was talking to the burgomaster on that day she came out of the bank and the look of horror on the old man's face.

"I came to tell you that the story is all around Pech and I heard it in Rovitz, too. It has not yet reached Paris, but if you marry

that man it will reach this city. All Paris will be talking about you. It will be a dreadful scandal. Now that I have warned you, I will go back."

In vain she entreated him to stay. When all importunity failed, she begged him to remain for a moment. She went out of the room, and, returning, placed in his hand a piece of paper. It was a bank draft to cover his expenses for the trip, which, she knew, he could ill afford. He looked at it and then tore it in pieces.

"Father," she cried, "is it because you suspect me that you will not take my money?"

"I believe in you, daughter, but I do not want to soil my hands with anything I have not earned. Keep your money. I only want what I dig out of the soil with my own hands."

He took leave of his daughter while she wept hysterically. At the door Popoff met him. Nish had informed his master that the strange visitor was Sonia's father. The ambassador closed the door and then said to the old man:

"You are Madame Sadoya's father, and as her father you must have great influence over

her. Let me ask you to use that influence to urge her to marry the prince. You do not know the severe straits our government is in. We are on the very verge of bankruptcy. We shall go to pieces unless something is done and very soon. If the prince and your daughter would marry, I see a way in which our country might be saved. They love each other very much. They want to marry, but something prevents them. I do not know what it is. As her father and for the sake of your country, I appeal to you to use your authority and command her to marry him."

The old farmer backed away from the ambassador. With horror staring from his weather-beaten face and with one trembling arm lifted to heaven, he made solemn adjuration:

"I swear that I came all the way from my country to stop this foul marriage, and I hereby call down the awful judgments of God on the head of my child if she dares to marry that man."

CHAPTER XX

The Guarded Treasure

Nish, in his eagerness to perform his part of the plot, could hardly reach Rovitz soon enough to satisfy his swelling ambition. The banker was absent, but Herdi lent him a ready ear. To the fertile brain of the young bank-robber several possibilities were opened by the messenger's scheme. His interest lay not in assisting the government loan, but he perceived how he could use the former innkeeper in furthering his own ends. He could not, he declared, permit the bank seal to leave his custody, but he would himself take it to Paris, accompanying the messenger on his return. It was Herdi who had circulated the story that the ironmaster was murdered by the prince. He alone, besides Danilo, knew what took place in the bank vault on the day of the tragedy.

His first use of the messenger was to impress

him with the truth of the terrible rumor. Playing the part of one who wished to conceal it rather than reveal it, he introduced him to a number of the bank patrons, during the conversation with whom the sickening subject was adroitly introduced. His next step was to bind Nish to secrecy when he reached Paris. There were several reasons for keeping silence. The promulgation of the dreadful affair would bring a scandal on the government, and the prince might take the alarm and fly. Besides —with a wink and a nudge—there was often money in knowing how to keep a still tongue.

The little messenger was quick to promise what the bank superintendent wished. He felt flattered by the attentions he received, being introduced as a government official and made the confidant of the banker's son. Someway, Herdi Vapin made the impression upon him that his own plot, stupendous as it seemed to him, was only a subordinate part of a vaster scheme which the bank officer had planned. Two more cunning rogues seldom entered

Paris than these two when they alighted at Montparnasse station.

Herdi's plot had two heads. The first related to the widow, the second to the prince. He went straight to the palace and requested to see Madame Sadoya. When she came in the room and beheld her visitor, she was amazed at his audacity, the more so as she was satisfied it was he who had set afloat the terrible rumor concerning the prince. She remembered his parting words at the bank—"I will go to Paris; you cannot escape me," and he was here in fulfilment of his threat, whatever might be the harm that lay in his evil mind.

He rose and made a profound bow.

"You see I am not easily discouraged. I came to offer myself again."

His mock politeness, his air of confidence, his villainous face filled her with loathing.

"To—offer—yourself—again—*you!*"

"Yes;—why not? You will hardly refuse me this time—you will hardly dare."

She only gazed at him contemptuously as she

would at a toad; she could not find words to express her resentment of his effrontery.

"I have information which you will be glad to pay for."

"Oh, you want my money—you, too, are after my fortune."

He laughed derisively. Of all the people in Paris, he alone knew her supposed solid fortune was but a hollow shell. He wanted her for other reasons. She was beautiful, the only woman he had ever loved, and if he married her he might escape exposure when the bank robbery should be discovered, for the stolen money would then be his wife's. He burned to tell her that she had no money and that he wanted her for herself, but he dared not play that card yet. The time had not come.

"My information is not to be bought with money," he said, loftily.

"Not if I offer you one million ducats?" she inquired, mockingly.

"Not for one million ducats," he answered with a flourish of his hand.

"It comes high."

"It is not to make me speak, but to make me keep silence that I ask a reward—to keep silence to every one but you."

"And you have some wonderful secret to reveal?"

"I have."

"Suppose I should tell you that I already know it. It is something about the prince—something very wicked."

He was taken aback. Some one had stolen his capital. The news had traveled to Paris before him. Unless—ah! She had known it all the while—from the beginning! He had darkly hinted of that to the horrified people of Pech. That was what made the old burgomaster's face look so grave.

"And suppose I tell you," she continued with supreme disdain, "that I do not believe a word of your wicked secret and I will not believe it."

"But I have the proof," he replied boastingly. "You forget that I was in the vault on the day your husband was—"

"Do not speak the word, Herdi Vapin. He died of heart disease."

He gave a short, malicious laugh.

"What about the struggle which was heard by all the men in the bank? What about the mark on his temple? What about the pistol shot which was also heard? And what about the pistol itself which was found smoking on the floor?"

She cowered beneath the cruel blows.

"Whose pistol was it?" he demanded, walking towards her.

"Answer me if you dare," he continued, as she remained pale and silent. "I will answer for you, Madame Sadoya. The pistol belonged to the prince."

"You cannot prove it," she answered defiantly.

"I can prove it for I have the pistol."

"Produce the weapon and I will believe you. Otherwise I shall believe you a liar."

It was precisely this point that worried him. It was the only weak link in his chain. When, the day following Sonia's visit to the bank, he

had opened the tin box he had been astonished out of measure to find the precious pistol gone and another substituted in its place. He could not understand it.

"I cannot to-day, but I will call again when I can produce it," he answered, covering his retreat with a threat. "Believe me, Madame Sadoya, your prince is living in a house of cards. You had better be careful how you treat me or I will blow the whole thing to pieces."

He had failed in the only spot where he feared failure and he went out cursing the luck that lost him the one piece of evidence he most needed.

But there remained the other part of his plot. What would happen if he set all afloat in Paris the rumor that Sixtus Sadoya, a wealthy iron-master had been foully murdered, and that Prince Danilo was guilty of the nefarious crime? It would render impossible between the prince and the widow the marriage which the government was trying to force. Herdi knew nothing of his three French rivals for Sonia's hand; he only feared the prince.

But the adroit schemer did not mean to set afloat the story. The prince would pay well to suppress it, or if that court favorite could not pay, the men behind him would be glad to do so, for a government is never in such financial stress that it cannot find the gold to stop the mouth of so distressing a scandal.

For his convenience to the scene of action the arch-plotter had secured a room in the house of Nova Kovich. Thither he now hasted for the time had arrived when the attempt was to be made to secure the tin box. He was not in sympathy with this part of the programme and trusted to his wits to frustrate the attempt to get the loan papers into the hands of the government. He found his fellow-plotters assembled and waiting expectantly. Thus far there had been small chance for Nish's wife to steal the tin box. Sonia had been completely prostrated after her father's visit and had closely kept to her room. It was a part of the cunning design of the intriguers to utilize the time of Herdi's call for their felonious purpose. While Sonia was listening to her third proposal from

the banker's son, the nimble-fingered wife of the little messenger would do her best to purloin the much-prized box. That she was equal to her part was amply proven when, a moment after Herdi's entrance, she burst into the room triumphantly holding something aloft.

It was the coveted box. She became instantly the center of an excited group.

"It was not easy," she panted, for she had run all the way; "the trunk was locked and the box, too, is locked."

"The more the locks the greater our hopes," exulted Nova Kovich.

"Yes, twenty million hopes!" cried Nish.

Every one gazed fondly on the box which held such a fabulous fortune. There beneath that frail lid reposed the treasure which the government had vainly exerted every effort to obtain—the papers which placed Sixtus Sadoya's vast legacy at the service of his country. Prince Nikola and Secretary Dusan should pay well for such valuable work.

They could not wait to fit a key to the lock. Khadja found a pry and broke the slender bar

of brass. The lid flew open. A ring of heads drew close around it. Then all fell back with looks of surprise and disappointment.. That which met their eager gaze was not a bundle of papers but a deadly weapon. A pistol lay ironically in the box, its cold mouth of steel seemingly rounded in a mocking smile.

Herdi bent low and then raised his head with a triumphant smile on his dark face.

"*Danilo Petrovic,*" he cried, pointing to the name engraven on the handle. It was as he thought. She had it. It was she who had effected the deft exchange in the moment she had been left alone in his father's office.

"Ha! ha!" he chuckled with a diabolical grin, while his fellow-plotters looked at him in a mystified way. "Ha! ha! I have her now—her and her precious prince."

CHAPTER XXI

The Prince's Pistol

Herdi's exclamation was not simply because he had recovered the lost link in the evidence against the prince—it was because her possession of the weapon connected Sonia directly with the crime. It showed that she was in collusion with the prince and it would not be difficult to prove that she was an accessory in the murder of her husband. He believed that he had both the prince and the widow in his power.

But he did not want to accuse the prince flatly to his face. It was not agreeable to call on a man who had once given him a good beating and might do it a second time. Since the affair at the dance, the two men had never been brought face to face except at the time of the tragedy in the bank. He began to look around for an intermediary. He wanted a man who was brave, a man who was cunning, and above

all a man who was not troubled with scruples. Such a useful catspaw he found in Nish, the little messenger. Having fully acquainted him with the plot and carefully instructed him in his part, he sent the cat to face the lion. Nish in this work was not a bit loath. His scheme to steal the legal papers having failed, he was hungry for another choice piece of rascality. That he owed his government position to the prince was not the slightest leash upon his conscience, nor did he even trouble himself with the question whether his distinguished victim was guilty or innocent. It was enough that his evil employer had set him a task and promised him a reward. He had resigned his place at the embassy and had only one more day to serve; and because he was desperate he meant to work the prince to the last ducat, when, if successful, he might retire and live as a gentleman for the rest of his life. Herdi Vapin had chosen well his tool.

It was early in the morning before breakfast that Nish knocked at the door of the prince. As the little messenger had been reduced from

his dignified position to become a man-of-all work, the prince was not surprised to see him. He did, however, lift his eyebrows when the serving-man made request that he might come in and have a talk with him. Supposing he wanted a trivial favor, the prince good-humoredly granted his desire and set him down in a cosey corner of his dressing-room.

Danilo had changed his mind about leaving Paris. Something in Sonia's manner at the moment when the ambassador interrupted them in the summer-house caused him to waver in his determination never to look on her face again. Her attitude towards him was perplexing. He was uncertain whether she believed in the sincerity of his feelings or held him to be like all other men—anxious to possess her money. Her promise to marry three Frenchmen and all at the same time amazed him. And the hour had almost come. It was noon of tomorrow. If it was all a huge joke it was a heartless one, for the French suitors took her in earnest. He was brooding on the hard road that love travels when he was aroused by the

knock of Nish. He little thought the errand of the ugly little messenger had anything to do with the affairs of his heart.

Nish had braced himself to the task of his life. The prince was keen and would catch him if he made a single slip in his plot. The prince had a temper and would kick him out of the room if he did not have a care for his tongue. He had seen those muscular arms thrash Herdi for his impertinence. And yet he had to hurt the prince's feelings—hurt them rudely in the most sensitive part of a man's nature. It was like extracting a thorn from the paw of a lion.

"Well, Nish, what is it?" Danilo inquired impatiently as the messenger sat dreading the ordeal. "Have you fallen out with your master?"

"Oh, I've fallen out with him all right, but that is not what I came to talk about. I haven't come about myself; I've come about you."

"About me?"

The prince looked amused. What possible connection could the ugly little messenger have with the great affairs of a prince?

"Yes, I know you have your troubles."

"In which I do not thank you to meddle, my little man."

"But there are troubles you don't know anything about. When I say you don't know anything about them, I mean you don't know that other people know anything about them."

The prince looked a trifle nettled. "But what business of yours are my troubles, you little meddler?"

"Oh, Prince, believe me, I come to you as a friend. Wasn't it I that made the meeting between you and Sonia Danvic? Wasn't it I that got up the wedding supper—"

"Of which I never tasted."

"But that wasn't my fault, Prince. I tried to keep everything till you came."

"You would have had to keep it a good while —a full week. But an end to this nonsense. Say what you have to say and out with it quick."

"You didn't come, Prince, but another man did."

"You are not in a history class, man."

The prince frowned.

"It's about that other man I want to speak."

"And it's about that other man I don't want to hear."

"I suppose so—I suppose so, Prince; very naturally you don't like to hear about him. You won't want to hear what I have to say, but the people are talking about it—all over Pech, and Rovitz, and I don't doubt the news will reach Castelo and Paris if we don't stop it."

"What news?"

"Why,—pardon me, Prince—they are saying the man that died in the bank—he didn't die —well, just naturally."

"How, then, did he die?"

"Why, Prince,—excuse me—I don't like to say it—but he was killed."

"Killed?"

"Well, when I say killed, I mean, you know, —murdered."

"And who, do the gossips say, murdered him?" inquired the prince, skeptically. He went about, completing his toilet as if the answer did not concern him.

Nish was silent. He had reached the crucial

point of the interview. Upon his reply he might be hurled down the stairs.

"Well?" demanded the prince at length.

"There is only one man, your highness, who could have any interest in slaying him."

"And who is he?"

"Oh, your highness, forgive me, I cannot—I will not—I dare not say!"

And he had no need for the face of the man before him became the face of a lion. It grew white, it grew red, it grew black. It glowered speechless and awful on the little messenger. Nish was frightened nearly out of his wits.

"Oh, please, do not be angry with me, your highness! It is not I—it is the people who are saying it. I don't believe it. I am sure you never did it. You are a great and noble prince."

He went on apologizing, flattering, cringing, until at last the accused man found his voice. His question was not exactly what Nish expected. The plotter was prepared with his evidence. But the prince only demanded:

"Has she—Sonia—Madame Sadoya—heard of this?"

"She has?"

"Who told her?"

Nish was too scared to think of the right answer. It would have been sufficient to have said that her father was there yesterday. But Herdi had trained him like a lawyer. It was supposed the prince would demand the reasons for the accusation, and he must be furnished with the proofs. Nish had them at his fingers' ends. The greatest of all was in his pocket. During every second of the interview he had been painfully conscious of it, for it thumped against his ribs with the loud beating of his heart. He took it out and held it up.

"Why, this was found in her trunk."

The effect on the prince was electric. At first he was dazed by its unexpectedness; then astonished at the strangeness of the place where it was found; at last he made a spring for it. But Nish had been well instructed in his part. As the weather was warm, the window stood open. It was the open window that had influenced Herdi in his selection of the room where the accusation should be made. As the prince

sprang towards him, Nish hurled the weapon out of the window. Both heard it strike the ground and then the sound of running feet. Some one had been standing beneath to receive it. Herdi had saved his best piece of evidence. Nish stood very close to the window and pretended it was an accident.

"Forgive me, Prince, I couldn't help it. I was so frightened when I saw you jump towards me, I let it fall. If you say so, I'll go after it."

"I've a mind to throw you after it. Yes, go after it and never return. Never dare to show your rascally face in my presence again."

The terrified messenger edged around the furious man and gained the door. But he did not go. His real object was not yet accomplished. The prince turned angrily.

"Well, why don't you go, you rascal? Do you want to provoke me till I punish you, you little rat?"

"I beg you not to be angry, Your Royal Highness, if I may speak another word."

"What now, you red-headed little villain?"

"Oh, Prince—dear Prince—consider—pray consider—people will talk—they will talk, and you don't want them to talk. It will get all over Paris and it will be dreadful."

Nish shook dolefully his fiery little head and wagged his long red mustache in a direful way.

"They will talk, and if I were you, Prince, I would hire some one to stop them from talking —some discreet man who knows how to put a bridle on their tongues. Forgive me for suggesting it, Prince, but if I were you, I would say, 'Nish, I employ you to see that this story goes no further; stop it right here; don't let anbody speak it—don't let anybody breathe it. Bottle it right up and put the cork in good and tight, Nish, and I'll pay you well for it.' Begging your pardon, Prince, I would say that, if I were you."

"Why, you infernal little blackmailer, I'll pitch you down the stairs," roared the prince, making a bound for the messenger, who disappeared with the quickness of a mouse darting into a hole.

CHAPTER XXII

The Burden of Great Riches

After the successive shocks to her feelings caused by the visits of her father and Herdi, Sonia's first act was to send for Natalie. There had been some reserve between the two friends during the last few days. The ambassador's wife felt pained because Sonia did not confide her love affairs to her hostess. Her promise to wed three French suitors at one and the same hour was puzzling everybody at the embassy. It was annoying to Natalie that she was not able to solve the mystery of her friend's strange actions. It was the day before the one set for the marriage and the ambassador's wife did not know who was to be the happy man to win her rich guest.

She obeyed the summons to Sonia's room with much alacrity, fully expectant at last to be let into the secret of the great riddle. Her friend

kissed her heartily and said she had something of great importance to reveal to her. They sat down close together, holding each other's hands.

"You know I have been much wrought up during the past few days," Sonia began.

"I should think so with three promised husbands on your hands," laughed Natalie.

The query "Which" shaped itself on her lips, but she was too dignified to pry into the affairs of her friend. She would let her guest reveal the secret of her love in her own way. During the last three days she had guessed successively that it might be the witty Jollidon because he was so handsome, or the fat Cascada because he was so flattering, or the scholarly St. Brioche because he was persistent in his offer. Now she was to know.

"You and your husband have been urging something upon me."

Oh, she was going to marry the prince after all! That was what the ambassador and his wife had been pressing her to do.

"And you have come to a decision," exclaimed Natalie, her face beaming with expectancy.

"I have decided to do what you wish me to, but not exactly in the way you desire."

"We want you to marry the prince."

"Rather you want the government to get my money through my marriage to the prince."

"Of course," replied the politic Natalie, "the government would be glad of any aid you might be able to render, but we want you to marry the prince because we think he would make you an excellent husband."

"Well, I have decided to help the government, but not to marry the prince."

Her friend looked at her for an explanation.

"I am going to give my fortune to the government. Will you please send for your husband?"

Natalie summoned a servant and sent for the ambassador. While awaiting him, Sonia made her hostess acquainted with the reasons that led to her decision. The bankrupt condition of her country, her dislike of being sought in marriage merely for her money, her weariness of the fashions and falsities of Paris, her longing for her old friends and her former simple and happy life in Pech,—these and other con-

siderations had induced her to give her millions to Marsovia.

The deciding influence she did not tell her hostess. Her room adjoined that of the prince. The high, squeaking voice of Nish had penetrated the wall. The murderous charge against the prince which her father had related to her she had heard repeated to the accused man himself at the mouth of the little messenger. She sympathized intensely with the man she believed to be deeply wronged, and she intended to show by one sublime act her faith in him whom she deemed incapable of so heinous a deed. She would make over her fortune to him, to be transferred by him in turn to the government.

The ambassador came in and rubbed his hands in delight when he learned of her magnanimous gift.

"It is splendid, glorious!" he cried. "Marsovia is saved and the embassy will be continued. Madame Sadoya, you are the saviour of your country."

On one point only did he demur from her

plan. He thought the gift to the government ought to be made through him, the ambassador, rather than through the prince who was only an attaché of the embassy. It was finally agreed that the money be turned over to Danilo, but that Popoff should be allowed the credit of having managed the affair. The ambassador immediately set himself to work to prepare notices for the press. The following morning the *Paris Matin* read:

MUNIFICENT GIFT TO HER COUNTRY

Madame Sadoya, the wealthy widow who has been visiting the Marsovian Embassy, yesterday astonished and gratified her countrymen by announcing that she will give her entire stupendous fortune for the use of her country. She reserves not a franc for herself, but gives it all away for the benefit of her embarrassed government. The members of the Marsovian Legation are jubilant, for they are now assured of their success in the effort to make Marsovia one of the

strong Balkan States. The fortune of the noble Madame is estimated at twenty million ducats, or sixty million francs. This magnificent gift is to be presented to Prince Danilo Petrovic, the first attaché of the Embassy, to be held by him and the trustees whom he will nominate for the service of the Marsovian Government. The credit of influencing Madame Sadoya in her patriotic purpose is chiefly due to Monsieur Popoff, the genial ambassador to the French court, who has managed the matter with great tact and ability.

Popoff's next act was to send for a lawyer and have the terms of the gift couched in legal phraseology. When her princely donation became known, Sonia became the center of an admiring group of her countrymen, who, following Popoff, hailed her as the saviour of her country. The ambassador and his wife were so elated that they determined to hold a garden party in celebration of the great event, and cards of invitation were immediately issued.

Of the members of the embassy who buzzed around the benefactress of her country, only one was absent. This was the prince. Since he had learned of the infamous charge against him, he had not been seen at the ambassador's house. This was not because he meant to retreat under fire, but he was so cut to heart that he did not want to see any of his people. He especially desired to avoid Sonia. That she believed him guilty was the unkindest cut of all. How his pistol came into her possession was a mystery. But that it lay concealed in her trunk and she had not acquainted him with the fact he counted against her. The matter certainly needed an explanation. It looked very much as if she was in a plot against him. If there was a conspiracy to ruin him, the pistol found on the floor where the dead man lay, would be a very damaging piece of evidence. And it was found in her keeping. Was this the secret of her pretended friendship but her real hostility? Was she seeking to draw him into a confession that he had murdered her husband?

He spent the day in the cafés and restaurants

of the city and at night went to a hotel. In the morning as he sat at breakfast, the newsboys were crying the papers. He bought one listlessly, but was too agitated to peruse its columns. It lay untouched on his lap while he sipped his coffee and thought until his head ached.

"I will accuse her to her face," he growled between his teeth. "I will let her know that I am aware of her perfidy and then I will leave her forever."

He rose from the table while the printed sheet fell unnoticed to the floor. Had he read a startling piece of news, he would have sought her in a wholly different frame of mind.

CHAPTER XXIII

Coffee and Pistols for Three

Madame Sadoya's three French suitors were not happy. Although she had enjoined each one not to mention his success to the others, in two hours they were all babbling together about it. At the Taverne Marcelle, they formed a noisy trio in front of the bar.

"Come and drink our happiness," said Jollidon, "we are to be married at noon on Saturday —Madame Sadoya and I."

"That cannot be," objected Cascada, "for the Madame has promised to marry me at that day and hour."

"I tell you the widow has accepted me," declared St. Brioche, "and it is our wedding that is to be on Saturday noon."

The three men compared notes and found that the promise had been made to each in exactly the same terms. The rivalry now became

sharper than ever. The would-be bridegrooms marched together back to the embassy to know what it meant. Sonia refused to see them, but sent Nish.

"The Madame says she does not expect you and cannot see you until the appointed time," he announced, bowing low in turn to each.

"But this is an outrage!" said Jollidon.

"It is preposterous!" declared Cascada.

"It is not treating us fairly," protested St. Brioche.

"She says she will marry at the day and hour set," Nish informed them. "But when she says she will marry, of course she means only one man."

"Which one?" they demanded in a breath.

"Madame did not inform me, but I heard her say she would marry the man that loved her for herself, and not for her money."

Nish assumed a judicial air, threw his head back, thrust his thumbs in the armholes of his scarlet dressing-gown and looked very righteously on the three candidates for the lady's hand.

By Permission of Henry W. Savage.

NISH.

Nish produced from his pocket a notebook and pencil, and proceeded to jot down their passionate avowals.

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"Tell her that I did not know she had any money," said Jollidon.

"Tell her I would like to see her lose every sou of her money so that I can woo her for her own sweet self," declared Cascada.

"Tell her I couldn't possibly touch her money for I have sworn to be poor all my days," was the charge St. Brioche gave the messenger.

"Well, Messieurs, I will write it all down."

Nish produced from his pocket a notebook and pencil and proceeded to jot down their passionate avowals, all the while leering at the one whose virtues he was recording.

"You with the pink neck-tie say—"

"Jollidon," interrupted the person addressed.

"Jollidon says he didn't know the widow had any money. He was struck dumb as a post when he learned that you were rich. But he says tell you he is fast recovering."

"You with the red mustache—"

"Cascada, but my mustache is not red," objected that gentleman.

"Cascada says he hopes you will lose every sou of your money, and he hopes you will lose it to him."

"You with the false teeth—"

"St. Brioche,—and my teeth are my own," exclaimed the self-styled artist.

"The man who owns his teeth says—"

"St. Brioche, I tell you."

"St. Brioche says he is so fond of poverty he swears he will be poor, but he has no objections to a rich wife. There, Messieurs, I will tell her what you all say."

Nish replaced his note-book and was backing out of the room under the combined gaze of the three suitors who did not know what to make of the queer little messenger. At the door he bowed very politely and said:

"For a consideration, Messieurs—for a consideration, you know, I might be of service to you. I see the Madame every day, and she will listen to what I say. I made the match between Monsieur Sadoya and the Madame. It was Nish that did that. And I might recommend another husband to her, but when I say I might, of course I mean if some inducement should be offered me, I might."

The three impecunious suitors looked helpless.

"A hundred francs and take it out of the fortune," offered Jollidon.

The others named higher sums to be paid in the same manner and the bidding became spirited.

"No, Messieurs,—cash down," declared the marriage broker firmly, having evidently a poor opinion of his patrons' chances.

Receiving no offer on these terms, he bowed himself out of the room.

Talking and gesticulating all the way, the men returned to their hotel. The dispute now became fiercer than ever. Various ways of settling the quarrel were suggested. One plan was that the successful suitor should pay a portion of the expected fortune to the disappointed ones, but as each man believed himself the favorite with the lady, they could not agree in regard to the amount.

On the morning of the day set for the marriage so fierce became the conflict that it became a matter of pistols and coffee. They were breakfasting together at the *Marcelle* and talking loudly. By chance it was the same restau-

rant where the prince sat, sipping his Mocha with the unread paper on his knees. As he dropped the sheet and started to leave the hotel, his attention was attracted to the wrangling men. Absorbed in his own troubles, he gave them scant notice and was passing out when the words "Madame Sadoya" caught his ear. He turned sharply and recognized the men as his three rivals for the hand of Sonia. The three common enemies welcomed a fourth, inviting him to come and help settle their quarrel. He refused to make one with them at the table, but paused long enough to inquire the cause of their dispute.

"It's about a woman," Jollidon informed him.

"A widow," said Cascada.

"A rich one," added St. Brioche.

"Madame Sadoya?" queried the prince sneeringly.

"The same."

"Do not ask my advice about women; I hate all women and I am done with them all," declared the prince.

"But what would you do if you were one of

three men, and a woman had promised to marry all of you?" inquired Jollidon.

"I would get the other men together and all of you vow to have nothing more to do with her."

"That is what we want to do, but we are afraid of each other," Cascada explained. "Twenty millions will make any man play a trick."

"And she is tricking you all," laughed the prince bitterly. "Well, Messieurs, you have my good wishes. May you all get her!"

He turned on his heel and the three unhappy suitors took up the quarrel where they had left it.

"I tell you I will marry her," shouted Jollidon, striking the table with his fist.

"You shall not! You shall not!" vociferated the others.

"Messieurs, we must fight," said Jollidon savagely.

"I will fight," replied Cascada.

"I will fight," echoed St. Brioche.

"We will go to the *Bois de Boulogne* and settle it," proposed Jollidon.

"I will buy the surest pistol in Paris," affirmed Cascada.

"I will have your hearts' blood, you knaves," vowed St. Brioche. They jumped up excitedly to carry out their deadly purpose, but now arose a difficulty. They had neither weapons nor means to purchase them. There are people in Paris who have fine clothes, but empty pocketbooks. These old beaux received from their manager board and lodging together with their natty evening suits, but very little besides. They were even too poor to fight a duel.

At length, Jollidon was lucky enough to find a friend who loaned him a couple of pistols and with these the fire-eaters hurried to the field of blood. Searching out a secluded place near the entrance, they prepared to settle the all-important question according to the code of honor. Cascada examined the weapons and found them empty. Here was a serious obstacle. With unloaded pistols and no ammunition they were not in a fair way to decide by bullet who should have the Madame and her millions. The affair began to look ridiculous.

"Let us settle it without blood," suggested St. Brioche, who had been the most bloodthirsty of all. "Why kill each other when there is a better way? Let us play a game."

The others quickly agreed. Near the gates of the wood a little coffee-house sent out its inviting fragrance. Thither the matrimonial candidates repaired, calling for cards and coffee. Jollidon took the greasy pasteboards and dealt for poker, but had not played long when Cascada charged him with throwing a false ace. The accused man denied the cheat and flung back the lie. Both men sprang furiously to their feet. Upon a post overhead hung two swords, relics of another affair of honor on the famed field. Each man instinctively grasped a handle and lunged with the blade.

"Hold, Messieurs, hold," cried the frightened restaurateur, hurrying in from the back room. "What is the matter, Messieurs?"

"We are playing this game for millions and a woman, and this man cheated," explained Cascada.

"I did not cheat, but he saw I was bound to

win the woman and he charged me falsely," returned Jollidon hotly.

Both men seemed quite willing to be held apart by the peacemaker.

"Who is the woman?" inquired the keeper of the place.

"Madame Sadoya of the Marsovian Embassy; she is reputed to be worth sixty million francs," volunteered St. Brioche.

"Then, Messieurs, you need not fight for her francs. Read this."

He picked up a *Matin* from the next table and pointed to a staring headline. It declared that the rich widow had donated all her money to the Marsovian government. Three pairs of eyes raced down the column. When they had finished reading, the ardent suitors had no more spirit than a whipped school-boy.

"The prince was right—women are tricky," ejaculated St. Brioche.

"We have been fools," murmured Cascada.

"Let us go home," said Jollidon.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Fallen Idol

The excitement at the Popoff palace over Madame Sadoya's promise to marry a Frenchman smouldered beneath the greater importance of her gift to her country, but on the day set for the ceremony it very naturally became a burning topic at the embassy. The ambassador and his wife, their resentment of her secrecy entirely removed by her generosity, even rallied her about the expected event.

"Shall you be married at the embassy or in church?" inquired Natalie, laughingly.

"And do you expect to spend your honeymoon in Paris or abroad?" ventured the ambassador, with a wink which he meant to be funny, but which ill comported with his pomposity.

"And your bridal dress—I have not seen it yet," teased Natalie.

"And the wedding gifts—why, my dear, what

are we thinking of?" added her husband.

"And how many guests are we to have to dinner?" quizzed Natalie.

"I must write it up for the evening papers," said Popoff. "I can write it now if you will give me the name of the bridegroom."

'Write it now, please," answered Sonia, "and just leave blank the name of the bridegroom. That is unimportant and can be filled in later."

But the hour came and went. The cathedral clock struck noon. All was quiet at the embassy.

"Why, where are my lovers?" inquired Sonia, coming into the parlor and looking around as if expecting to see them standing in expectant line and dressed for the wedding. All the members of the embassy were gathered in the room—not because they really expected anything would happen, but just as even a skeptic is attentive on the day the fanatic has set for the world to come to an end. They began to be witty at the expense of the absent bridegrooms.

"They have heard bad news," said Nova Kovich.

"Or there has been a drop in the matrimonial market," suggested Khadja.

"You blessed little rogue!" cried Natalie, embracing her guest. "This is the trick you meant to play on them all the while."

"You mean it is the trick they have played on me—to agree to marry me at a certain day and hour and then not come. But, of course, I knew they would not come once I was separated from my money."

"But I wouldn't have dared!" said Natalie. "One of them might have come."

"No,—they were not the fish to bite a bare hook," replied Khadja. "A Frenchman is not a fool."

But there was one lover not to be disposed of so easily. Herdi Vapin continued to weave his plot with consummate skill. Sonia did not know that he was stopping with Nova Kovich, for the cunning rascal had enjoined his friends not to reveal his presence at the embassy. Hence, she was surprised when, going out to get a full breath after the nervous strain of the marriage fiasco, to run full upon him in a turn of the

garden walk. He was watching for her and he timed his steps so as to meet her in the most secluded part of the court. She started and clutched at her heart as it gave a great bound at the unexpected meeting. He bowed low and tried to take her hand, but she brushed it aside and sought to pass him.

"Your lovers have not all failed. Here is one who will never fail you."

He stood in her way, barring her passage to the house.

"Herdi Vapin, let me pass," she commanded.

"Sonia, I love you; I fall down before you; see—I kneel at your feet."

At the word he dropped down on one knee and forcibly seized her hand.

"I am your real and only lover. I do not want your money; I am glad you have given it away. Accept me for your husband—you will not?—" for she had wrenched herself free and was forging past him—"you will not? Then, by Heaven, I will make you. You little know the evidence I have against—"

But she was out of ear-shot. She ran into

the house and up to her room, locking herself in. If she had listened to his accusation she might have stayed to meet it. She supposed it was against the prince. She did not know he had spun his web around her also.

There was one piece of evidence—and that the most important—she knew he did not possess. *The pistol in the trunk.* She looked fondly at the place where it was concealed, with a glad thought that she had it in her power to save the prince.

But Herdi's threat terrified her. What was this evidence that was so damaging? Although she had vehemently declared she did not believe in the guilt of the prince, she could not close her eyes to the fact that he had a very strong motive for the crime. The more he loved her the greater his impulse to the dreadful deed. She had seen him draw his pistol that day in the Rovitz tavern just before going to the bank, on the occasion when he first met the man who took his place as the bridegroom at the wedding in Pech. She saw the hatred flash in his eye.

And then the tell-tale weapon found hot and

smoking on the floor of the bank vault! How fortunate that she had wrested that piece of evidence from the hands of Herdi. Now she would keep it more carefully locked than ever.

She went to her trunk to see what further precaution she could take to insure its safety. At first she rummaged carelessly, then more anxiously, and finally with terror, the cold perspiration standing on her brow as, toss and tumble the things as she would, there was no trace of the tin box. She looked frantically around the room to see if by any possible chance she could have taken it out and failed to replace it. Only after the most exhaustive search was she forced to the conclusion that she had been robbed.

But who had stolen the box? Not an ordinary thief, for her pocket-book lay there with its contents untouched. Whoever took the box wanted the pistol. And he must have had a strong reason for wanting it. There could be but one man and one motive. *It was the prince.* His room was next to hers. Watching his opportunity, he had stolen in, found the key

to her trunk, searched through that receptacle, obtained the box and made off with the pistol. And he wanted the weapon in order that he might destroy the most tangible evidence against him.

With sickening horror, the cold logic of the situation forced her to believe, not only that the prince was a murderer, but a sneak thief as well. And when once the bar of her faith gave way, the floods of all evil things against him swept through her mind. The prince had basely murdered her husband for the sake of her money!

And where was this man—this noble prince? For a whole day he had not been seen at the embassy. All had gathered around her to thank and praise her for her splendid service to her country—all save this man, who should have been first among them to show his gratitude, for it was for his sake the glorious gift had been made and through him it was to be transferred to the government. And yet he had not thanked her—had not even been to see her or talk with her about the matter that was at

this moment on the tongue of all Marsovia.

With guilt and cowardice in his heart, had he basely fled. For him she had given away her fortune and he had proved unworthy.

"I will leave the embassy; I will leave Paris; I am sick of life," she cried.

Rising from the floor whence she had fallen, she hurried out to acquaint her hostess with her hasty purpose while it was still fresh. After a search she found Natalie in the summer-house.

"I have come to say good-bye," she said, catching for breath. "I leave Paris on the first train.

"Leave Paris—why—Sonia—"

A step sounded on the walk. They turned to see the prince. He had followed Sonia from the house.

"Ha, they have had another quarrel," thought the ambassador's wife. "They will settle it best here alone together."

Then aloud: "The prince says he is going to leave Paris, too, but I hope neither of you will go unless you go together."

Then she darted away and left them alone.

CHAPTER XXV

The Gift Revoked

"You wish to see me?" Sonia said, hardly glancing at his white face.

Her own was equally pale, the skin having the appearance of pulverized alum, it was so drawn with distress.

"I wish to see you once and then never to see you again," he answered in a strange voice for him.

"Well, I am here."

She did not look at him, but turned her head to one side, holding her hand on the door while he stood on the lower step.

"I could not depart without letting you know that I understood all your treachery. I do not wish to leave you under the impression that I am befooled."

"Why do you run away? Are you afraid to stay?"

She bent her searching eyes upon him as if she would read his very soul.

"I am not running away and why should I be afraid?"

"You are not afraid of me. It is not love—it is the law you fear."

"The law!"

"Yes, the law. Wrongdoers fear the law."

"And I am a wrongdoer! You believe the infamous charge my enemies have made."

"Because you have taken such extraordinary means to disprove it."

"And ought not a man, when accused, to exonerate himself by every means?"

"No, not by every means—not by becoming a thief."

"A thief!"

"Yes,—a thief. The noble Prince Danilo has shown himself a thief! He crept into my room, searched my trunk and stole something from it."

She did not care to name the article. It would be embarrassing to explain how she came by the pistol.

The prince was astounded at the charge. He had been unable to forgive her because she believed him guilty of murder, but a sneak thief! It was too much. Had a man made so base an accusation, he would have felled him with his fist. For a moment he was too astonished and shocked even to speak. He stood, pale, trembling, speechless. She went on:

"I would not believe you guilty of murder until you added theft to the greater crime, but now I believe you killed my poor husband. Oh, you wanted my money! You pretended to love me! You were so much more honorable than the Frenchmen! You wanted me for myself, you said, and all the while you were plotting and contriving to get my fortune!"

He still stood rooted to the step, not understanding the nature of the theft of which he was accused or the motive she ascribed to him.

"If you wanted that—that article in my trunk, why did you not come to me in an honorable way and say that you desired it? Why sneak into my room and steal it? And why should you want it, anyway, except to hide

your black guilt? Oh, I am sick of the sight of men! Of all men, I thought you the most upright, the most pure, and now I find you are the wickedest and meanest of all."

But now the tide turned—the flood of speech was rushing back to his tongue.

"You talk to me in that way—you, the woman who was once almost my wife! Who has put such cursed thoughts in your head? I know you have joined my enemies; I know you are in the plot against me; but who has lied to you with such a devil's tongue? You say that you are sick of the sight of men, but I tell you, Madame, I hate woman with a hatred as deep as hell. Now I see what I escaped by not marrying you, thanks to the good ironmaster."

"And what have I escaped?—a thief—a murderer—"

"Take care, woman, there is a limit to what a man can endure."

"Oh, you would kill me as you did my husband. But we are above ground now; we are not down in a dark and lonely vault. You might not get off so easily now."

"Well, good-bye. I hope I shall never see you or your like again."

He did not offer his hand, he did not even look at her—his gaze was on a cloud which at that moment eclipsed the sun.

"And you are the man who professed to love me and the only man whom I—"

She broke off and began again:

"Oh, I would have stood by you till the last if you had only trusted me—if you had only come to me—if—"

Now that the moment of final parting had come, it was too much. The torrents burst—the tears came scalding and copious. She was in the mood for explanation, but not he. Her words had penetrated too deep. He could neither explain nor forgive. Again he said "good-bye," lifted his hat and strode proudly away.

Sonia waited until he was out of sight and then ran to her room. With the door locked, the floods were free to flow and they did flow until she was exhausted. Then came resolve—not sudden as had been her determination to

leave Paris, but slowly evolving through her tears. Going to her trunk, she found the document by which she renounced her property and turned it over to the use of the government. It was properly drawn and signed and only waited for the prince through whom its terms were to be carried out. And the prince had come and gone! She read it over carefully.

"And he is the man for whom I have sacrificed everything!" She read it over three times, at last scornfully, mockingly, bitterly. Then with tight-drawn lips and shaking hand she sought the ambassador. He was in his study, smoking a cigar and idly watching the destruction of some waste-paper he had thrown into the grate and ignited. She apologized for the intrusion—she had important business. He laid aside his cigar and prepared to listen. She declined the proffered chair and stood near the fire.

"You see this. It is my gift to my country. And you see it now," she tore the papers in pieces before his amazed eyes. "And now."

She threw them upon the flames.

With an exclamation he rose to snatch them from the fire, but with her two trembling hands she held him back until it was too late. They flew—a black and crumbling mass—up the chimney.

"You think me capricious, but we women are not so tenacious of a purpose as you men. We are subject to whims."

"But, my dear Madame, you surely do not mean that you recall your gift?"

"I do recall it and I want the fact published in the morning papers. I ought not to receive credit for what I shall not do. Kindly send for Nish—or I will."

She went to the wall and pressed the button.

"Do not ask me why I change my mind. Something has happened; I have been grieved."

The ambassador knew it related to the prince and inwardly he cursed the man for a fool, a mule, a dunce. He sent for Natalie, and when she came, husband and wife labored with the determined woman the rest of the day and well into the night. Meanwhile she had despatched Nish for a reporter.

"Say in the morning press," she dictated to the newspaper man, "that for reasons of my own I have recalled my gift. Do not speculate about these reasons at all. They are my own private affair. Make it emphatic that Marsovia will get none of my money. Say that I have decided to live in Paris, and that I may possibly renounce my country altogether and become a naturalized citizen of France."

CHAPTER XXVI

Blackmail

It was nearly midnight when, convinced that his efforts were vain, Popoff ceased to remonstrate with Madame Sadoya and argue with her for the retention of her Marsovian millions, but late as was the hour he had a caller who would not be denied. It was Herdi Vapin, cunning and smiling. The hour suited him. All was quiet at the embassy. He could pour the poison into the ambassador's ear without fear of interruption.

"I suppose you know why the Madame gives her money to Marsovia," he began, drawing his chair close to Popoff's with the air of one who has a great secret to impart.

The ambassador had never met his late caller before, but as the banker's son he accorded him considerable respect. The name of Rudolf Vapin was an honored one at court and it was to

be hoped the son would make as high a mark in the world of finance.

"She gives her money from the loftiest motives of patriotism," Popoff replied.

He did not choose to mention the withdrawal of the gift until he learned what his caller had to say. Herdi laughed.

"Your Excellency, did you ever know any man or woman to give away a fortune to the government and become poor?"

"If this was not her motive, then pray, what was it?" inquired the ambassador with great dignity as one who is not accustomed to be contradicted. Herdi hitched his chair a little nearer.

"She was afraid."

Popoff drew himself up stiffly. There was a dark hint in Herdi's tone and manner which the ambassador would have resented even more sternly a few hours previous, but now he did not feel so kindly towards the widow. He let the fellow go on.

"Your Excellency, there is a plot—a very great and horrible plot—which would shake all

Marsovia were it revealed, and I have come to tell your Excellency about it. I hope I have your very private ear."

"Go on."

"Sixtus Sadoya was a very rich man. He was reputed to be worth a hundred million francs. He married the daughter of a poor farmer. He lived only a week after his marmiage. He died in the vault of the bank of which my father is president."

"All that has been published in the papers, I believe," replied Popoff, indifferently.

"But it was not published in the papers that he was murdered."

"You will have to find strong proof of that, young man," said the ambassador sternly. He was in no mood to have false sensations thrust upon him.

"I have it. I am the superintendent of the bank. I was present in the vault. There was only one other person there besides the one who was killed."

"And who was that?"

Herdi leaned forward and fairly hissed in the ambassador's ear:

"It was the prince."

The ambassador rose with great dignity.

"If you have come here to make such an accusation against Danilo Petrovic, the high and noble prince of Marsovia and the first attaché of this embassy, I fear you have come to the wrong place."

But Herdi was not in the least abashed. He had anticipated every possible reply the official could make.

"Your Excellency is open to proof. The prince was madly in love with the maiden. They were to be married, but he failed to appear. She took the ironmaster instead. And there was another motive—the money." He cunningly watched the face of the ambassador as he talked. As he failed to note any mark of impression, he struck a more telling blow.

"And there was the pistol found on the floor where the murderer had dropped it—found smoking. And it had a name on the handle. The name was—*'Danilo Petrovic'*." Popoff was staggered, but not convinced.

"All this is only circumstantial evidence and

fails to count against the well-known and exalted character of Prince Danilo. Have a care, young man, lest you get into trouble with your tongue. Such accusations against a man of the standing and reputation of the prince are not to be lightly treated."

Then did the adroit plotter prepare for his final thrust.

"Your Excellency, there is no use in mincing matters. I know the prince killed the ironmaster."

"How do you know it?" demanded Popoff, in the tone of one himself injured.

Herdi rose to his feet. If he had been as tall as the ambassador, he would have fairly blown the words into his ear:

"I saw him."

"You saw the prince kill the ironmaster?"

"I did."

The ambassador sat down and leaned his face on his hand. He had been dejected, almost despairing, before his caller came, but here was a new and serious trouble. Aside from his shocked feelings on finding a close friend guilty

of so heinous a crime, there was to be considered the effect upon the government.

"Now you know why the Madame gives away her money," pursued Herdi.

"She wishes to save the prince?"

The young man laughed.

"She wishes to save herself."

Popoff looked at him for an explanation.

"Listen, Most Noble Ambassador. This telltale pistol was found in the Madame's trunk." He took the weapon from his pocket and held it out handle first. The name of the prince was sunk in letters deep. "Which shows," he went on with malignant exultation, "that she knew all about the murder, that she had talked it over with the prince and that she was concealing this piece of evidence."

Watching the effects of his startling revelation as a physician studies the diagnosis of a loathsome disease, he continued playing with unerring touch on the nerves of his august listener.

"Now that it begins to be bruited about that the prince is guilty and that she is implicated

in the plot, she gets scared, and what does she do? Ha! ha! she gives away her money! She hopes to cover her crime with her gold. Listen —the very next day after the pistol was found in her trunk she makes this gift to her country. They are a precious pair—the prince and the widow—and the money they get by murder they will give back to the government—these lofty, patriotic people—and perhaps they will not lose it by giving it away, for the prince is to be the government if rumor is correct. Danilo is to be the reigning prince, and so they will give away the money—this precious pair—and have the money, too."

The ambassador listened and then said coldly:

"There is one serious objection to your charge —Madame Sadoya has recalled her gift; she will not bestow her fortune upon Marsovia."

Herdi had not expected that blow, but he had the quickness of an expert wrestler.

"Ha, she concludes the evidence against her is not so black after all. Well, I have shown you how black it is. Now, Your Excellency, the government needs her money. You want to get

her money for the government. You have the club that will make her yield—or, rather, I have it." He tapped the pistol lightly on the handle. "You want my help."

He put the weapon in his pocket, as if to say the indispensable aid was not to be obtained without a substantial consideration.

The ambassador pushed back his chair, his back stiffened, his eyes flashed.

"Your meaning is that we threaten her, and, under pain of exposure if she refuses, compel her to give her money. No, young man,—no—a thousand times *no*. If there is evidence enough to warrant it, she will be prosecuted like any other criminal, but the government of Marsovia will have nothing to do with threats or plots."

He brought his fist down thunderingly on the table.

Herdi's face did not pale—not by the slightest shade. No matter what move his distinguished opponent might make, he knew that he was the master of the game. He only laughed.

"The government will have nothing to do

with plots—ha! ha! Listen, Monsieur Ambassador,—the government is already in a plot—a deep and awful plot! Let me say to you, Monsieur Popoff"—he dropped the title of respect as if what he was about to say lowered the ambassador or increased his own importance so that the two stood upon a social level—"that there is a great deal more to this plot than I have told you. The government planned it and the government is behind it. It was in sore distress. It needed money. It sent the prince to get the money. The men at the head of the State knew that the prince loved this woman. They would not let him marry her when she was poor, but when she became rich they saw a way to replenish their treasury. They said to him, 'Go and marry her at any cost.' If not, why was he sent to interview the ironmaster? And what business had the prince in the bank vault?"

Dazed with horror, the ambassador listened. His torturer went on:

"I do not say that you are guilty, Monsieur Popoff. I believe your hands are clean of the

horrible affair, that you did not know what your your superiors were doing, but I want to say that the uncle of Danilo, Secretary Dusan and Prince Nikola—they are the real murderers of the ironmaster. I repeat it—they killed him and I have the proof."

He waited for his terrible accusation to sink into the mind of the ambassador and then he continued:

"Oh, it will be dreadful—this horrible scandal about the government when it comes out! It will destroy the embassy, it will ruin Marsovia—the very name of our country will be a stench in the nostrils of the world. It may even send the heads of our government to prison. There are no words to describe the deplorable situation. How can any citizen of Marsovia hold his head up after this dreadful affair? But, Monsieur Popoff, the scandal need not come out, it can be covered up. I am the only witness to the crime. Think what it is worth to the government that I keep my mouth closed."

The contempt of the noble ambassador for the

conscienceless blackmailer was spelled large in the scorn of his eye and the curl of his lip, but the subject was of too tremendous importance for him to act hastily or give rein to his feelings.

"What is your price?" he inquired calmly.

"My price is a million francs and—the hand of Madame Sadoya."

Popoff knew the game of all diplomats—delay, and only replied: "Come on the second midnight and I will be ready for you."

CHAPTER XXVII

A New Sacrifice

The news that Madame Sadoya's gift had been recalled was published in some of the evening papers and copied in all the morning sheets. It made a great sensation in the embassy and among its friends. One of its first effects was to bring the three Frenchmen eager to recover what had been supposed to be lost. In their view the published gift was but a canard and was meant as a test of their devotion. It was simply a shrewd woman's trick. They were much vexed with themselves because they had been so easily fooled. But they had lost none of their assurancce and determination.

Sonia, in spite of the anguish her quarrel with the prince had caused, could not help being amused at their audacity. With a pretence of indignation, she demanded to know why they

were not present at the appointed hour to fulfill the marital engagement.

"I was knocked down and robbed," explained St. Brioche. "I had gone to purchase the wedding ring. It was a very expensive one, and it caught the eye of a fellow who was hanging outside the store, and just as I was crossing the Boulevard the robber struck me a stunning blow. I was very sorry."

"I beg your pardon, Madame," apologized Jollidon, "but I was suddenly taken ill. It was a terrible sickness—cramped me all up. My doctor positively forbade me to go. I beg a thousand pardons of the Madame and I hope she will forgive me."

Cascada's excuse was even more farcical.

"It was the fault of my tailor. I had given him emphatic orders to have the wedding suit on time, but he made a mistake in the measure and it would not fit. You know, Madame, I am rather stout and I could not possibly get into it. I was distressed beyond expression and I gave the dolt a good scolding. I am sure it will not occur again if the Madame is so good as to make another appointment."

Sonia laughed at them as they bowed and apologized and flattered.

"And the telegraph wires were all broken and the telephones were out of order and the messengers were all out of town," she mocked. "Well, Messieurs, you were in a sorry plight, and I think, as you found it so inconvenient to keep the first appointment, I will not make a second. Really, I am not worth so much trouble. And now, Messieurs, you must excuse me."

She left them, and they returned to their lodgings, cursing the stupidity which had lost them a fortune.

As she went from the room, Nish met her with the information that her host and hostess wished to see her.

"I hope there is no bad news," he ventured; "they are looking very serious."

"I think I understand what they wish," she replied, supposing they were still hoping to change her purpose and retain her fortune for her country.

Popoff had spent a sleepless night, thinking over the painful and perplexing situation. He

could not believe the heart-sickening accusation brought against his government, and yet there was much to sustain the terrible charge. Aside from the evidence Herdi had given, there were some things hitherto unaccounted for which the dark theory would explain. Was this the reason the prince and the widow could not make a marraige in spite of their mutual love and the tremendous pressure brought to bear upon them? Did the pangs of conscience hold one or the other from carrying out the programme of the government and from following the promptings of their own hearts? And why had the prince without notice absented himself from the embassy during the last two days—since the arrival of Herdi, the only other living witness of what took place in the bank vault on that fatal day? These and other sharp reflections had made for the ambassador a thorny pillow.

With the day he had taken his wife into counsel and together they had gone carefully over the difficult situation. Their conclusion was that no money could or would be paid for

silence, but if Madame Sadoya would marry the banker's son it would be the shortest way out of a business that threatened to become a national calamity.

Sonia came in with lips tightly set and took the chair placed for her between her host and hostess.

"My dearest friend," began Natalie, "we are going to ask you to do something for your beloved country."

"I know—to give my fortune to my country. But, surely, you have read the morning papers. You must know that Marsovia is not to be my country."

"I have read the report, but I cannot believe it to be true. You love Marsovia."

"I have loved my country, but when my country treats me as it has, I am not bound to love it."

"We are going to ask you one more favor and we shall never ask another," said the ambassador.

"Suppose your country were in grave peril—a greater peril than it has ever been before and

than you can conceive of. Suppose you could save every Marsovian, yourself included, from hanging the head in shame—would you do it?"

"I cannot conceive of such a situation. The heads of the government may fail in their ambition to make Marsovia a great State, but the humiliation is for our statesmen alone. The people have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You do not understand. A stain—which must not even be named—rests upon our State, or will rest upon it unless we take prompt measures to prevent it. Only you can save us from disgrace."

"By the gift of my money?"

"By the gift of yourself."

Popoff looked at his wife as a sign that she should treat the delicate subject.

"Dearest, we have many times exhorted you to take a certain man for your husband."

"Oh, the prince! You are going to thresh over that old straw again. But I want to tell you at once it cannot possibly be. Owing to what has happened recently, a marriage between the prince and myself is now absolutely impossible."

In this new declaration, the ambassador saw fresh confirmation of his fears. It was the murder that cast its shadow over them. They dare not marry. But Natalie went on:

"No, dear, it is not the prince—it is quite another man."

Sonia opened her eyes with interest. What man could possibly take the place of the prince in the eyes of Popoff and his wife?

"His name is Herdi Vapin."

Sonia turned pale and sank back in her chair.

"Herdi Vapin!"

The plot of her persistent suitor began to loom before her. It had spread to larger dimensions since she had viewed it last. He was carrying out his threat.

"Yes, he is the son of the banker at Rovitz and a most eligible young man."

"My dear Natalie and my dear Ambassador, all the reasons why I cannot marry the prince lie against this man also, and another greater reason besides."

"What is that?"

"I do not love him."

"Which means you do love the prince."

"I did not intend it that way, but you may make of it what you please."

"You will not marry this man to save your country?"

"To save the prince, you mean,—but perhaps the prince *is* the country."

"No, my dear," said Natalie, "you do not understand. Something dreadful has happened. Perhaps it has not happened—perhaps it is untrue, but whether true or false, it must be hushed up. Herdi Vapin has it in his power to ruin Marsovia and he has named you as the price of his silence. Now can you make the sacrifice to save us all?"

"Not unless you tell me the whole story. I am entitled to know it all before I decide so great a question."

Popoff and his wife withdrew and consulted a few moments. When they returned, the ambassador said:

"We have decided to tell you everything."

And then, while her eyes dilated with horror, they revealed the entire plot as narrated by

Herdi—the guilt of the government, the awful stain upon the name of their country. They made to her a powerful appeal to save Marsovia from the most shameful and bloody scandal.

"At midnight to-morrow you are to give him the answer?"

"At midnight to-morrow."

"And at that hour I will be here and will give him my answer."

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Robbery Discovered

Popoff, as a wise statesman, made a forecast of what would happen if he could not pay Herdi's price and the young extortioner's tongue was permitted to wag. The final result—the overthrow of the present government. The second—probable revolution. The third—the swallowing of Marsovia by Austria, the huge monster that ever stood with open jaws across the western frontier.

In all important matters of State, the ambassador had hitherto consulted his superiors, but now he must act for himself. The very existence of Marsovia in all likelihood depended upon himself and his action at this critical hour. He must have some power which would checkmate Austria in her greedy designs. There was no nation in such friendly attitude towards his own as the one on whose soil he now stood

and to which his country had sent its first embassy. He determined to counsel with the President of France.

He was received by that dignitary in a most cordial manner. The ambassador set forth the situation in strong, though well-guarded language, hinting at a peril he could not name. President Fallières assured him that France would not look on idly while Austria devoured her smaller neighbor. That aggressive empire could not be permitted to grow to overswollen dimensions and thus destroy the balance of power among the nations. Marsovia and the other Balkan States must be preserved intact. The ambassador returned much encouraged by the promised help of a great power in case Herdi's unsavory revelation whelmed his country in a sea of distress.

Meanwhile Sonia was engaged in a little statecraft of her own. The Austrian ambassador, Baron von Arundel, was making his first call at the Marsovian embassy. He had neglected that courtesy, considering Marsovia too small a power to trouble himself with the usual

amenities. But he had read in the papers about the brilliant young widow who was visiting at the embassy—her beauty, her wealth and her princely gift to her country, which she had since recalled—and he was curious to see the lady about whom so much was being said.

In the absence of Popoff and Natalie—for the ambassador had taken his beautiful wife in order to make a more agreeable impression upon the French President—the Austrian official was received and entertained by Sonia. The young widow beheld a man of commanding presence, of military bearing and of most engaging manners. A huge mustache, sprinkled with gray, and gold-rimmed glasses on his piercing black eyes, added to his immense dignity. He was the image, in Sonia's view, of the potentate he represented, the Emperor Joseph himself. He had one further attraction —he was a bachelor. He ingratiated himself at once into the good-will of his fair entertainer, and the shrewd statesman made it appear that her country had not an interest which was not of his country also. She was much im-

pressed. She needed a counselor in this trying hour. Here was the one disinterested man. France wanted her—and her money. Marsovia wanted her—and her fortune. She had no friend who was not prejudiced or prepossessed. This Austrian of royal blood and noble bearing —he would be impartial. She told him of her distracting trouble—or as much of it as she dared confide to him—and received his advice.

"You would make a mistake to cast your fortunes with France," he counseled. "Austria is your true friend. In spite of all that has been said to the contrary, there is no one who has the interests of your country at heart so much as His Majesty, the Emperor Joseph."

"You would have me become a subject of Austria?" she inquired.

"No, I do not say that," replied the wily statesman. "Do not forsake your country altogether, but be independent of it. In other words, place yourself in a position outside of it, but near it where you can help if necessary but not be controlled by it."

She was impressed by this sensible advice.

"What then would you have me do?"

"Live in Vienna. It is more beautiful than Paris and nearer your native land. You should marry a duke or a baron. I can introduce you into the highest Viennese circles. You will like our people; they are not as frivolous as the men of Paris."

He talked until Sonia was quite enraptured with the prospects he painted.

But at the door, when he departed, a piece of news met them which caused the spirits of both to sink as lead. A newsboy was crying the evening papers and he ran up to them, spreading out the sheet with the startling headlines. The baron saw first and tried to cover it with his hat which he held in his hand, but he was not quick enough. Sonia bought a paper and carried it to her room to read. What she saw was this:

FAILURE OF THE MARSOVIAN BANK

ALL ITS FUNDS LOOTED

MADAME SADOYA LOSES HER ENTIRE FORTUNE

She had pulled down the house of cards about

her head. When, after her quarrel with the prince, she decided to renounce her country, she wired her lawyer to remove her money. On her order he went to the bank, and then the robbery so long concealed came to the glaring light. The vault was empty. The bank was but a shell.

It was midnight. Herdi had come to receive his answer. Pale and dignified, Popoff and his wife met the blackmailer. He took the same chair he had occupied the night before, smiled the same villainous smile, made the same heartless demand.

"Well, am I to speak or keep still?"

As pre-arranged, Sonia came at that moment into the room. She held a rolled newspaper in her hand. Herdi cast his lustful eyes upon her, as if already his.

"You will be satisfied with a part of the price," said the ambassador. "You demand a million francs from the government, but if you get this lady you win a hundred million."

Popoff and his wife had not read the evening

papers and did not know of the loss of Sonia's fortune. Herdi had read them and thanked his stars that he was four hundred miles away from the wrecked bank.

"No," replied the arch-plotter. "I want the money and the lady."

"But you will get neither," declared Sonia, standing before him and looking the villain in the face.

"You refuse to marry me?"

"I do."

"Then to-morrow the world shall know who killed your husband."

"Have you read this?" demanded Sonia, spreading the newspaper before him.

Herdi turned pale. His hope had been that she would not connect him with the news of the robbery spread through the city. As the weeks had passed and she had not revealed the secret he had dropped in her ear over the wine that night in the Pech tavern, he had come to think she had not grasped it clearly or else had forgotten it.

On her part, she understood that he had

taken a few of the funds of the bank, but she did not comprehend the magnitude of the robbery until it was now announced in the paper. But as she read, she knew at once who was responsible for the collapse of the bank.

He did not answer; he cowered before her look and tone.

"You—Herdi Vapin—are the robber. Before the world I accuse you of having wrecked the bank of Marsovia."

The ambassador leaped to his feet and touched the bell.

Herdi jumped up and looked around as a cornered rat seeking for escape.

Popoff pushed him back into the chair. "Send for the police," he commanded, when Nish appeared.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Plot Laid Bare

The banker, Rudolf Vapin, sat in his private office when a midnight message reached him to come at once to Paris. The culmination of his troubles had come. For five weeks he had carried on the business of the bank with the narrowest of margins, cleverly concealing the loss of its funds. He had written letters to Madame Sadoya entreating her not to withdraw her money, for it would mean the destruction of the bank and perhaps the ruin of the country. But when her lawyer appeared with an order and a force of men, he had no alternative but to open the empty vaults.

The sensation shook the city and the nation. Police and detectives were put on the case. The banker was placed on a rack of torturing questions. His answers were mainly negative. He did not know where the money had gone. He

could not tell what had become of Herdi, the custodian. He was kept under surveillance, and when in response to the midnight message of Herdi to come to Paris, he started for that city his footsteps were dogged by the officers of justice.

Arriving at the embassy, he was directed to the nearest city prison. There he found, with the exception of the prince, all the members of the embassy, including even the little messenger and his prying wife. Nish had thought better of his resignation and had begged to be retained.

The magistrate was about to hold a preliminary examination to determine if there was sufficient evidence of guilt to hold the prisoner. Popoff drew the banker aside and informed him of his son's accusation against the heads of the government. Rudolf Vapin, knowing Herdi's skill in weaving ingenious plots, refused to believe the story, and together the banker and the ambassador exhorted the unhappy young man to tell exactly what occurred in the bank vault, promising if he did so to stand by him in his trial for the lesser crime.

Although the proceeding was irregular, the magistrate, when made acquainted with the facts, consented to it, because the two offenses were connected; but he suggested that Prince Danilo be also summoned. As there were two witnesses to the tragedy, their evidence ought to be taken separately. After some delay Danilo was found at a hotel and although he could not be properly subpœnaed in a case not on trial, he readily agreed to come. His testimony was received first while the prisoner was remanded to his cell. The prince narrated the events on the memorable day as follows:

"We three entered the basement of the bank, the superintendent leading. He opened the vault and stood holding one of the heavy doors. The ironmaster went in, but the superintendent did not follow. I had reason to distrust young Monsieur Vapin, and stood in the entrance. Suddenly he tried to push me in and close the door, but I grappled with him and pushed my way out while he banged the door shut. He started to run; I called on him to halt and drew my pistol and fired to frighten him, but he

escaped. Then I dropped the pistol, ran up stairs and gave the alarm."

"The testimony tallies with the facts," said the banker. "There was no pistol wound on the body of the ironmaster."

Then Herdi was brought in.

"Tell the exact truth," enjoined the father. "Let us know exactly what happened in the bank vault."

The young robber cringed. Four pair of eyes were focussed upon him—his father's with pity, the ambassador's with expectation, the prince's with hatred, Sonia's with scorn. When he was informed it would be for his interest to tell the plain facts both about the robbery and the pretended murder, he made confession.

"Well, I took the money. I meant to bring it all back, but the cursed gypsies robbed me. When the prince and the ironmaster came to the bank, I thought it was all up, and that it would be a good trick to shut them up and make my escape. But the prince did not quite get in. He fired at me and I ran away."

"And you came to Paris to concoct a plot against your government," said the magistrate sternly.

The prisoner was silent.

"And you brought this piece of evidence with you."

The judge took from the table the prince's pistol, which had been found in Herdi's pocket when he was searched.

"No,—that pistol came to Paris before me," sneered the prisoner.

He looked meaningly at Sonia.

"I brought it," she explained. "I found it on his desk in the bank and I thought he meant to use it in some way against—well, against the prince." She blushed and dropped her eyes before his surprised glance. "I knew he hated the prince, and I was sure he had no right to it and so I took it."

"But how came the prisoner by it?" inquired the magistrate.

"He stole it."

"No, I did not—it was the innkeeper's wife," declared Herdi.

"The messenger's wife," interposed Nish, more concerned for his own title than for his wife's honor.

The magistrate adjourned the case until he should receive the extradition papers which would turn the culprit over to the courts of his own country for justice, and all except the prisoner left the court-room pleased with the day's work. Popoff was delighted at the collapse of the plot against the government. The banker was glad that his son had confessed. Sonia had a great burden lifted from her heart. And the prince went back to the embassy.

CHAPTER XXX

Lovers' Oaths

It was the night of the garden party. Sonia's gift could be recalled, but a social event in the honor of the gift could not be so easily canceled. The cards were out and it must be carried through at whatever cost. It consisted of three parts: First a converzatione, held in the garden, during which the guests ate ices or sipped wine; then the grand dance in the spacious parlors; and finally the supper, served on little tables under romantic arbors erected in cosey corners of the court.

Sonia reckoned chiefly on the dance. It suited her whim to dress in Marsovian costume as on that night in Pech when she fascinated the prince. She did not, indeed, don her country cap or wear her wooden sandals, but the short skirt, the massy cloud of lace, the unbound hair—all the features that made her an astonishment to the Parisienne, gotten up by

hair-dresser and modiste, she reproduced to render herself again the giddy girl of the mountain before she became the dignified madame of the metropolis.

She refused to dance with any man—her widowhood was too short, she explained—but when the whirling couples paused and the haunting music ceased, she stepped forth upon the polished wood. At first she swung in a large circle over the wide-gleaming floor, and then, concentrating her graceful motions, spun ring within ring—a labyrinthine wheel, weaving with every whirl a changing weft until the spectators were dazed with surprise and wonder.

The question, "Who is she?" ran from lip to lip among the admiring guests, all of whom found excuses for her breach of etiquette when they learned that the charming danseuse was the charming widow of Marsovia. It was not a made-to-order company like the one at Popoff's first reception. There was no longer any call at the embassy for the services of the fortune-hunting Jollidon and his rival compan-

ions, for the social qualities of the genial ambassador had secured him distinguished friends among all the representatives of the foreign courts in Paris, and hence the applause accorded to Sonia's performance was in a sense a tribute from the whole world.

Two, at least, of these guests were smitten by her beauty and grace. One was the prince. He was in that state of mind when impressions are easily made—the mood of penitence. He felt that he had basely wronged the noble woman, and wanted to make amends, but up to this time he had been unable to meet her since their bitter quarrel. He watched her skipping and whirling on her pretty foot until he was mad with love. He wished that those soft, black eyes, which seemed to clothe one down with kisses whenever her gaze met that of an admirer, would rest more frequently upon him—her only true lover.

But the prince had a pompous and powerful rival—the Austrian ambassador. At first Baron von Arundel was not much impressed with the sparkling little lady. Since the

news that her fortune was gone, she had lost lustre in his eyes and he saw in the short-skirted dancer only a graceful peasant girl from the mountains. In his view she needed her millions to make her attractive. But now arrived a piece of news which exalted her immensely in his estimation.

Hardly had she ceased from her bewildering gyrations when Popoff came excitedly into the room holding a yellow piece of paper in his shaking hand. He entreated silence while he read aloud. It was a telegram from the banker, Rudolf Vapin, and ran as follows:

"The gypsy band that robbed my son has been found and the money, except a few thousand ducats, recovered. Congratulations to Madame Sadoya."

The skillful dancer became at once the center of a throng of admirers. The guests who had been loath to accord her grace, now heaped compliments upon her lavishly. The baron was especially attentive and flattering. A ballroom affords small opportunity for an offer of marriage, but, begging the loan of her fan, he

wrote on it a burning line. The prince, who had been jealously watching the affair, came forward. The baron folded the fan and returned it to its owner. She, pretending not to notice what was written on it, gave it to the prince to hold while she sipped an ice. He, opening and reading, pretended also to write, but he was using the rubber end of the pencil, seeking to erase what he saw. When she perceived what he was doing, she snatched the fan and read aloud:

"I love you and I offer you my heart and hand."

"Messieurs, one of you has written this and the proposal honors me, but before I accept it, I must tell you, for the sake of our Fatherland, that if I marry again I lose all the property."

One suitor looked grave; the other happy.

"You lose your millions?" inquired the baron.

"Quite so. And now, Messieurs, I must beg to ask you which one of you wrote this on my fan."

"Not I," lied the baron.

He turned on his heel and disappeared.

"You lose your money if you marry?" repeated the prince, in a tone as if he was glad of it.

"Yes."

"Then you will be poor."

"Yes."

"Then—"

"Well?"

"Can't you guess what I want to say?"

"No. Why not say it if you want to?"

"But I said I wouldn't say it."

"That was when I was rich. You can say it now."

"True; and I will."

Host and guests had withdrawn to the garden for the supper. They were left alone.

"I love you," said Danilo, after a pause.

"Ah, you have said it!" cried Sonia, exultingly, and then she added: "One of us had to be foresworn, for I had vowed you should say it."

"But, Prince, you can't marry her." It was Popoff, who, returning to look for them, had overheard their sacred secret. "Think again.

Are you going to take her without any money? I heard her say she would lose it if she married."

"Yes, I lose my money—because I give it to my husband."

THE END

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